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BLOODY REVOLUTION
AEW's Heroes Get
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BEAT THE CHAMP
The Mountain Goats'
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B3CCA 4 EVER
She's Back In The
Studio (And The Ring)

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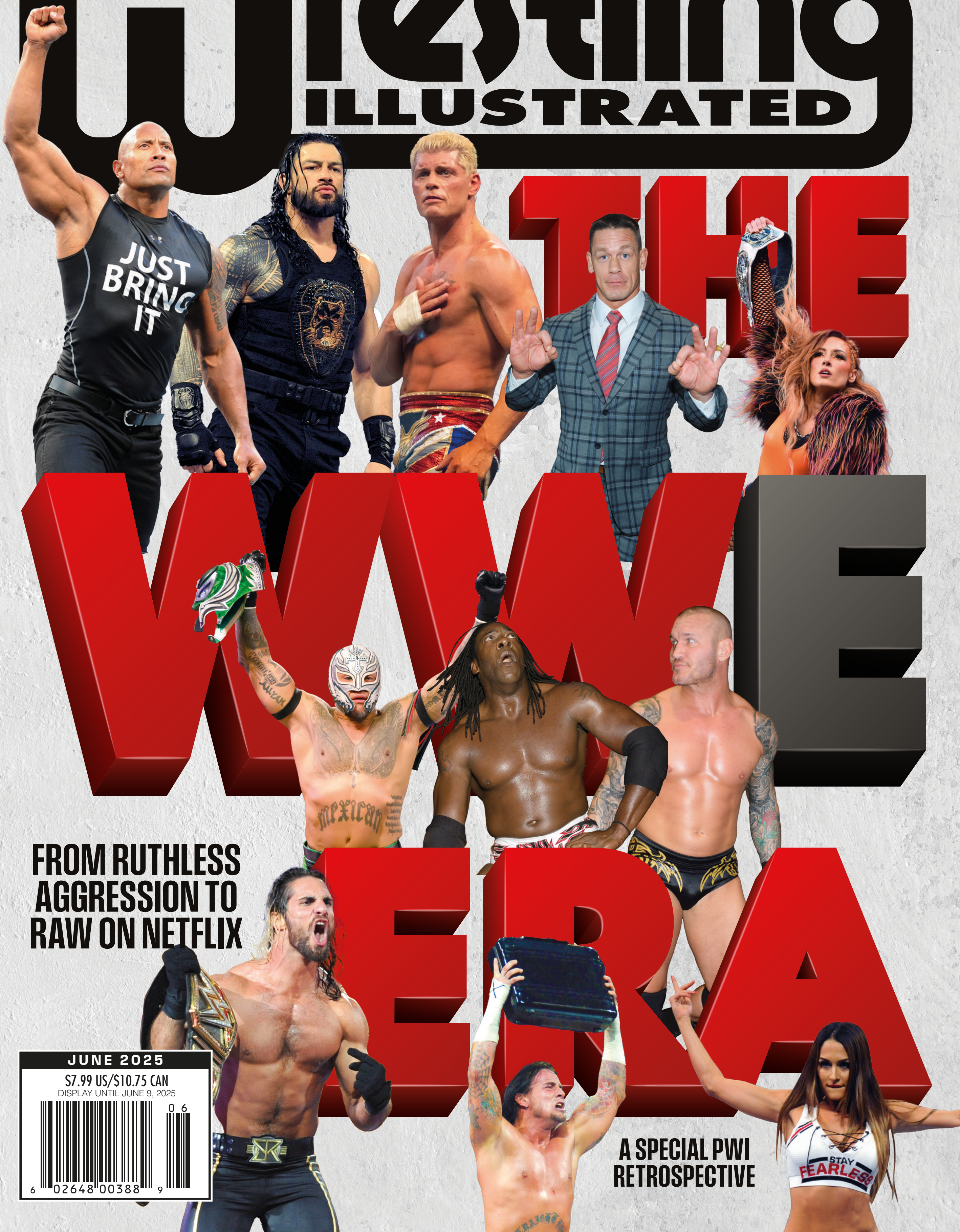

THE WWE ERA

FROM RUTHLESS AGGRESSION TO RAW ON NETFLIX

A SPECIAL PWI RETROSPECTIVE

JUNE 2025
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HOSTED BY AL CASTLE & BRIAN R. SOLOMON

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FROM THE DESK OF ...

NAME OF THE GAME

FROM ITS GRITTY, intense matchups to heroic showings at the Hammerstein Ballroom, Game Changer Wrestling has drawn more than a few comparisons to the late ECW. In 2025, GCW invites yet another parallel between itself and the erstwhile "Land Of Extreme": its symbiotic relationship with the WWE.

Like Paul Heyman before him, promoter Brett Lauderdale has earned a reputation for producing raucous wrestling shows featuring no-holds-barred battles, heated mat exchanges, and fantastic high-flying action. From hardcore fan favorites such as Nick Gage, Matt Tremont, and Jimmy Lloyd to colorful personalities including Mance Warner, Allie Katch, and EFFY, GCW went from rugged upstart to legitimate touring phenomenon, packing venues all over the U.S. and on international soil (including the U.K. and Japan).

Given the company's popularity, it should be completely unsurprising that Game Changer Wrestling has landed on the radar of the industry leader. And yet, even we at *PWI* are shocked by the extent to which the promotions have begun to collaborate.

It began with members of the NXT roster, including Charlie Dempsey and the Creed Brothers, being booked for Josh Barnett's Bloodsport—a no-frills, no-ropes fighting environment that inspired WWE's own "Underground" bouts. Dempsey even name-dropped the popular GCW show concept during an episode of *NXT*.

Last year, Shayna Baszler joined the fray, clashing with TJPW's Miyu Yamashita and former GCW champ Masha Slamovich in the Bloodsport ring. While Bloodsport constituted a proving ground for NXT stars, for Baszler, it was a passion project. Her participation also represented a vote of confidence from WWE in the GCW product.

Ahead of the April 2025 Bloodsport show, which was set to take place in Las Vegas over WrestleMania Week, even more WWE stars were announced for the festivities, including Karmen Petrovic, Karrion Kross, Pete Dunne, and Natalya. It was evident, with the addition of those names, that WWE and GCW's relationship had continued to improve. But the Bloodsport talent bookings weren't the only surprise in store.

In mid-March, following news that WWE would be introducing championships for its Independent Development (ID) stars, the company dropped a bombshell of an announcement. Those inaugural titleholders would be crowned in a tournament, with opening rounds to take place the night before Bloodsport at—drumroll, please—an event presented by GCW under its Collective banner.

Why was that so significant? Well, it meant that the Men's and Women's ID championships, which will be contested between wrestlers who regularly compete for various indie promotions, would be inextricably tied to Game Changer Wrestling. Whether or not WWE and GCW continue their relationship in the years ahead, the history books will show that the ID tournament for the former kicked off at the latter.

Some indie wrestling enthusiasts bristled at this revelation. They reasoned that a rebellious league like GCW should not be cozying up to the most established brand in the sport. After all, if the massive, Endeavor-owned WWE is calling the shots on a Game Changer show, is that show truly independent? And even if WWE is truly interested in fostering a strong, independent wrestling ecosystem—which, at least to a point, it should be—when does that become a problem? Where does it leave the indies if the circuit's most viable promotions become *de facto* feeder systems for WWE? At which point does WWE consider those top promotions to be legitimate competition and withdraw support?

These are all questions worth asking and points worth debating. But, for now, there is no denying the success of Game Changer Wrestling as a company that has done things its own way. We have not seen such an interesting and mutually beneficial partnership between WWE and an independent league in quite some time. And that is something worth celebrating.

Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

JUNE 2025

PRO Wrestling ILLUSTRATED

22

THE WWE ERA

As of June 2025, World Wrestling Entertainment has been around longer than the World Wrestling Federation that preceded it. From Ruthless Aggression to *Raw* on Netflix, here is the story of WWE in the 21st century.

BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

38

BLOODY REVOLUTION

Could a night of big, bold wins for the promotion's beleaguered heroes signal a changing of the guard in All Elite Wrestling?

BY KEVIN McELVANEY

44

BEAT THE CHAMP

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Mountain Goats' musical tribute to wrestling's territorial era. Singer-songwriter John Darnielle reflects on the achievement.

BY COLETTE ARRAND

50

B3CCA 4 EVER

The musician and self-professed "Celebrity Fighter" has become one of the independent circuit's most exciting performers.

BY CANDACE CORDELIA

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

COVER PHOTOS:
THE ROCK, ROMAN REIGNS, JOHN CENA, BECKY LYNCH, SETH ROLLINS, CM PUNK, NIKKI BELLA
(George Napolitano);
CODY RHODES
(Jordan Williams);
REY MYSTERIO
(Earl Gardner);
BOOKER T
(Gary Dineen);
RANDY ORTON
(Stu Saks)

JUNE 2025

CONTENTS

DEPARTMENTS

Before The Bell

8 | Media Review
9 | Names Makin' News
10 | One to Watch
11 | A Bit of Fun
12 | Ringside
16 | Quick Count
18 | The Lockup
20 | Win, Lose, Or Draw

The Scrum

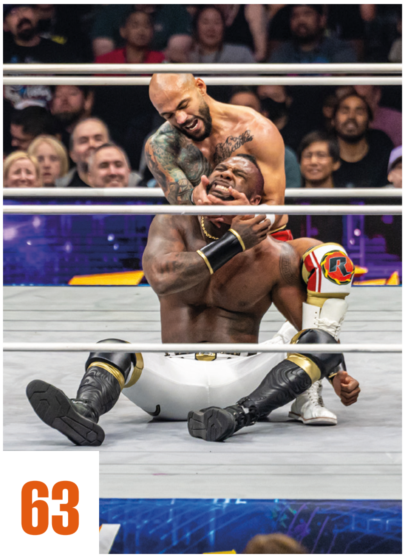
58 | TV Breakdown
60 | Mat, Stage, & Screen
62 | The W Column
63 | Righteous Wrap-Up
64 | About Face
65 | On Heels
66 | Brainbusters
67 | El Tirabuzón
68 | The Irish Whip
69 | Coast To Coast

The Finish

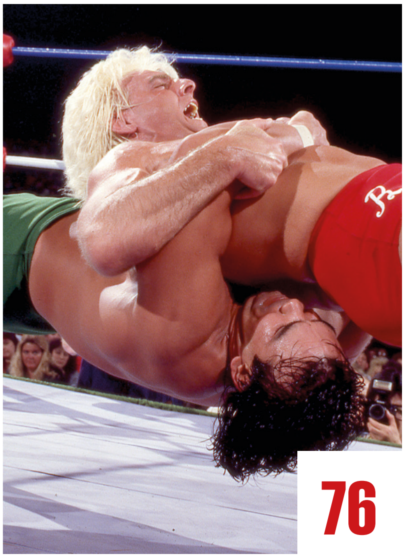
72 | Arena Reports
76 | The Way It Was
78 | Official Wrestling Ratings
82 | Drawing Blood

12

16



63



76

UP NEXT
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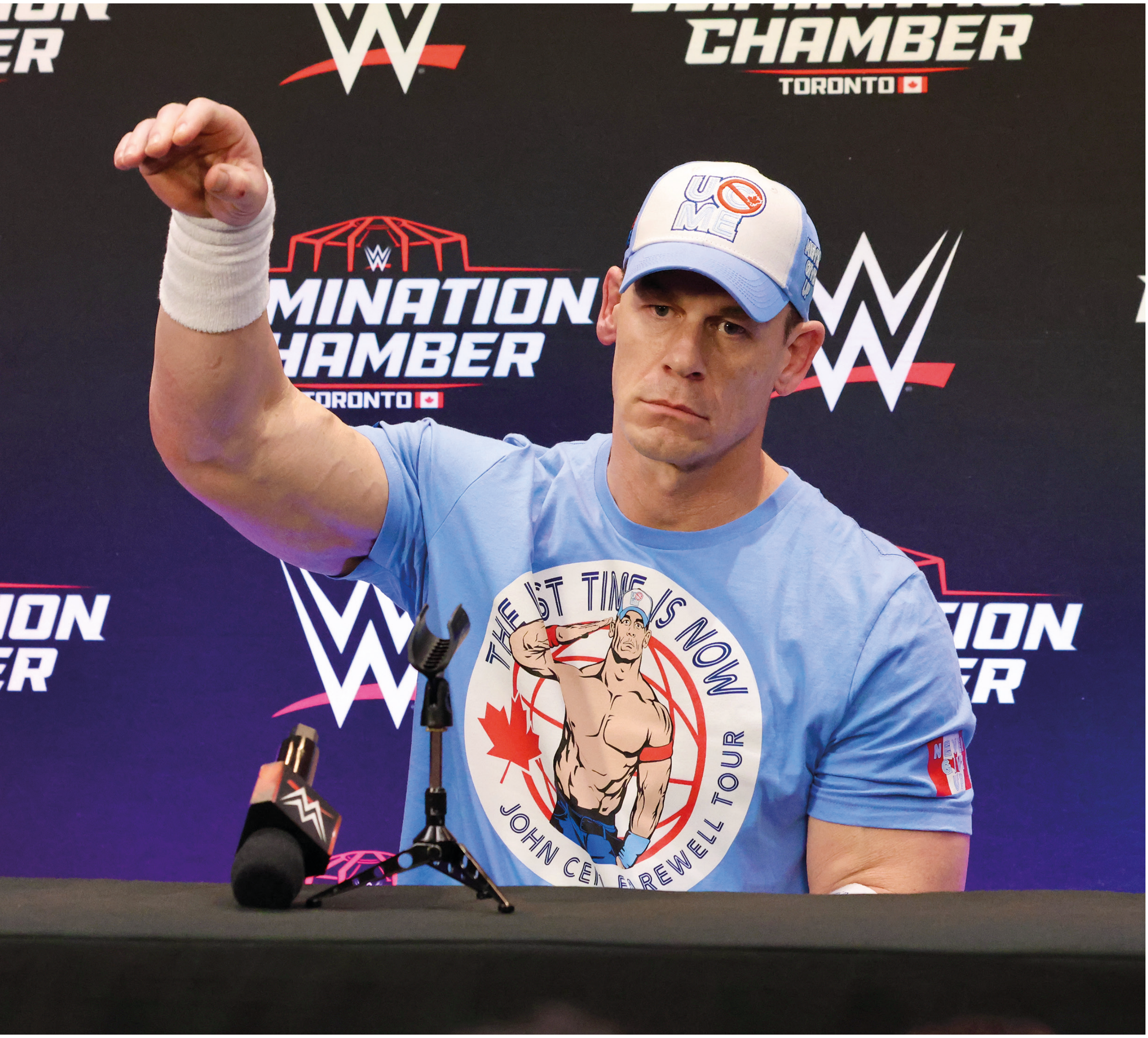
Before THE BELL

MEDIA REVIEW **8** | NAMES MAKIN' NEWS **9** | ONE TO WATCH **10** | A BIT OF FUN **11**
RINGSIDE **12** | QUICK COUNT **16** | THE LOCKUP **18** | WIN, LOSE, OR DRAW **20**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TORONTO
THE LAST TIME IS NOW
JOHN CENA FAREWELL TOUR

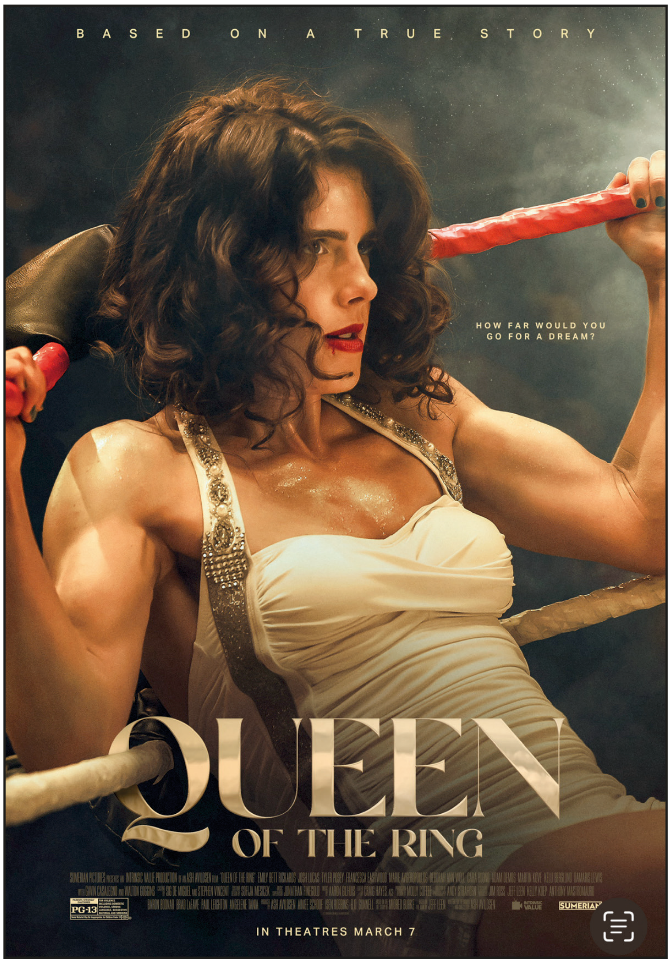
JOHN CENA performs his most savage mic drop to date at the Elimination Chamber post-show press conference.

Photograph by **STEVE ARGINTARU**

| BY KAREN PETERSON

QUEEN OF THE RING

The life story of **MILDRED BURKE**, as adapted for the silver screen, is both entertaining and enlightening.



COURTESY OF SUMERIAN PICTURES

IN A TIME WHEN professional wrestling was gaining momentum, yet women were banned from competing against one another, Mildred Burke set her sights on the spotlight, center ring, and marquees across the United States. Directed by Ash Avildsen, *Queen of the Ring* stars Emily Bett Rickards as the great Ms. Burke. The new film chronicles the legendary wrestler's journey from single mother, working in her mom's diner, to the first million-dollar women's professional athlete.

Against the backdrop of the 1930s midwest, Rickards breathes life into one of the most notable journeys in women's professional wrestling history. With Josh Lucas as Billy Wolfe, the pair paint a dizzying dream of carnival lights and sparkling diamonds that devastatingly descends into adversarial business dealings and a bitterly lopsided divorce.

Avildsen adapted the film from Jeff Leen's biography of Burke, *The Queen of the Ring: Sex, Muscles, Diamonds, and the Making of an American Legend*. Although there are some creative liberties taken, the film captures the grit and glamour of the golden era of wrestling while telling an inspirational story about the struggles of a group of women seeking to break away from the societal norms of the time. Though it is a rather optimistic interpretation of the life and times of midcentury women, it does touch upon taboo topics for the time, such as divorce, single motherhood, domestic violence, queer relationships, and segregation.

The ensemble cast mixes professional wrestlers and actors together, and finds near perfect balance within that ratio. Toni Rossall (Storm) and Kailey Latimer (Kamille) brilliantly serve as two of Mildred's greatest in-ring foils, Clara Mortensen and June Byers. Together, they build key arcs within Burke's journey for two completely different reasons. Francesca Eastwood is undeniably captivating as Mae Young—one of the few aside from Burke to stand up to Wolfe, and one who stands by Burke when she eventually splits from him.

Damaris Lewis, as Babs Wingo, leads a trio of Black American gymnasts-turned-wrestlers, alongside Trinity Fatu (WWE's Naomi) as Ethel Johnson and Cameren Jackson as Marva Scott. Deborah Ann Woll offers a beautifully bittersweet interpretation of Gladys Gillem and the catastrophic event that leads to a fracturing of loyalties within the Wolfe group. It sheds light on two industry-wide concerns still affecting pro wrestlers today: mixing pleasure for the sake of advancing within business; and the impact concussions and other injuries have on safety within the sport.

Walton Goggins dazzles as Jack Pfefer, the wrestling promoter credited with introducing creative storytelling to the ring. Wrestling fans will enjoy hunting for special wrestler cameos including Mickie James as Fabulous Moolah, Britt Baker as Debbie Nichols, Jim Cornette as an unnamed NWA Commissioner, and director Ash Avildsen as the WWWF's Vince McMahon Sr.

Queen of the Ring makes a great entry-level film for those curious about women's wrestling. It tackles the challenges women have faced in the industry—such as sexism and taking on the Boys' Club—and also pulls back the curtain by explaining terms like "shooting," going into business for oneself, and the concept of kayfabe.

Compared with other screen portrayals of pro wrestling, *Queen of the Ring* occupies the sweet spot in the middle of the ring. It offers something for those who love grittier wrestling films, like Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* or Sean Durkin's *The Iron Claw*, with the optimism and feel-good themes of Netflix' *GLOW*.

We give *Queen of the Ring* four out of five suplexes.

TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the **TOP 10 WRESTLING-RELATED ITEMS** you've been talking about lately and our tongue-in-cheek reactions to each:

PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

John Cena clobbers Cody Rhodes with his own gold watch as musical superstar Travis Scott looks on.

10. WWE ANNOUNCES HALL OF FAME CEREMONY TICKETS PRICED AT $8,500 EACH.

The ticket price included chauffeur service compliments of the hottest WWE ID prospects, and a continental breakfast served by Brutus "The Barber" Beefcake.

9. NIC NEMETH AMBUSHES MATT HARDY AT TNA SACRIFICE.

Turns out Nemeth still harbors a grudge after being passed over for the role of Señor Benjamin in "The Final Deletion."

8. WWE LAUNCHES THE NEW SHOW *LEGENDS & FUTURE GREATS (LFG).*

A companion production featuring undercard talent is in development, with the working title of *Mediocre Enhancement Hirelings (MEH).*

7. AN OUTSPOKEN SPORTSWRITER BLAMES TONY KHAN FOR THE JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS' LACKLUSTER SEASON.

In hindsight, Khan conceded it was probably a bad idea to make Mac Jones moonlight as a Slush Puppie concessionaire at Christmas Collision.

6. MVP SEEMINGLY SUGGESTS AN ALLIANCE WITH MJF.

Rumored names for a possible tag team include "Men Of Letters," "M^2VJPF," and "Amalgamated Wrestling & Championship Extruding, LTD."

5. TRAVIS SCOTT IS RUMORED TO BE IN TRAINING WITH WWE.

The award-winning singer was cleared for in-ring work after officials ruled that Auto-Tune does not count as an illicit performance-enhancing substance.

4. VINCE MCMAHON IS SPOTTED AT SUPER BOWL LIX.

The disgraced mogul was taking some time off from his rumored new business venture, which is either a new sports entertainment company or a giant machine that blocks out the sun.

3. CM PUNK AND DOMINIK MYSTERIO TRADE SHOTS IN A NASTY ONLINE EXCHANGE.

The dispute began when Punk suggested that Dom switch from conventional chicken tendies to deep fried, extra silken tofu.

2. TONI STORM AND MARIAH MAY STEAL THE SHOW AT AEW REVOLUTION.

Both women received high praise from members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as well as the American Association of Blood Banks.

1. JOHN CENA SHOCKS THE WORLD BY TURNING ON CODY RHODES.

In an even more surprising turn of events, Cena put the Experian purple cow through a barber shop window.

WE HEARD THAT!

FROM AROUND THE WRESTLING MEDIA-SPHERE, HERE'S A ROUNDUP OF INTERESTING QUOTES THAT HAVE BEEN ON OUR MIND.

"Think I might crash out."

—R-Truth, reacting to John Cena's turn, via social media

"I transcend the boundaries of demographics, because I'm blessed enough to be able to appeal cradle to grave. And that's because that's always been my goal, because that's WWE's goal in demographics. The goal is cradle to grave."

—Paul Heyman on his longevity in wrestling, from an interview with The Hollywood Reporter

"You can't walk through the halls in AEW without rubbing elbows with a legend or a future legend. It's just the best. There's so many great people."

—Renee Paquette, discussing her enthusiasm for AEW with interviewer Denise Salcedo

"It's kind of going to depend on what I do in the next few years, as far as outside of WWE or behind the scenes in WWE. Both of those things are appealing to me. So, just got to figure out what that feels like. But I feel good right now. I feel very good."

—Seth Rollins, on the eventuality of retirement, from a conversation with WFAN

ANYONE. ANYTIME. ANYPLACE

Since training at the world-famous Nightmare Factory, **BROOKE HAVOK** has given it 110%.

Brooke Havok makes her way to the ring at a GCW show in her native California.

PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE DINH

HER FIRST CAREER SINGLES match took place against Britt Baker on an episode of *AEW Dark*. From that point, it was evident big things were in store for Brooke Havok, the popular independent wrestler known for her love of emo and pop-punk music.

"When I was a kid, I always answered the question 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' with either 'a rockstar' or 'WWE superstar.' So, I like to think I'm doing my younger self justice by who I am as a performer now," Havok says with a laugh. "I grew up around emo/punk culture—concerts, festivals, mosh pits, crowd surfing, chaos, expressing yourself through what you wear. And I like to bring this energy into wrestling, whether it be in or out of the ring."

Like many of today's ambitious indie wrestlers, Havok became a fan at a young age. "Growing up, my family couldn't afford cable TV, and my older brother had a collection of WWF/WWE DVDs, so we would constantly watch those," she recalls. "That was when I was around 7 years old, and I was hooked. I remember seeing the '98 Hell in a Cell match with The Undertaker and Mankind. And as a kid, I thought, *These guys are invincible, they're like superheroes. I want to do that.*"

Despite the DVDs' admonitions of "Don't Try This At Home," Brooke Havok and her four siblings would play-wrestle, attempting moves on one another. Havok recalls being drawn toward Edge, 'Taker, Lita, and the Hardys before later taking inspiration from Paige (Saraya) and Rhea Ripley ("how much they were able to accomplish at such a young age").

With lofty goals in mind, Havok began her wrestling training at the Nightmare Factory under Cody Rhodes and QT Marshall—part of the school's very first camp. She debuted in December 2020 on a showcase for the academy, with her match against Britt Baker taking place just a month later.

From there, Havok's momentum has kept apace. Appearances for high-level indie promotions, including Game Changer Wrestling, HOODSLAM, and West Coast Pro Wrestling, yielded additional opportunities. One of those was a two-and-a-half-month excursion to Japan, where Havok competed on cards for Marvelous and Pro Wrestling NOAH. She remains proud of the Japanese tour, alongside her extensive GCW outings, citing these efforts as pivotal to her growth as a wrestler.

"Both places have such high-level, incredibly talented wrestlers on their rosters, and I truly believe you get better by osmosis when wrestling these people," she says. The California native names bouts with Megan Bayne, Miyu Yamashita, and Kylie Rae as among her favorites, adding, "I believe I've grown so much through all of these matches and love being challenged and pushed to new levels."

During those encounters, Havok has sharpened an offensive arsenal featuring moves like the PTSKnee (twisting single-knee codebreaker variation), Brooke-182 (standing corkscrew senton), and HelloGoodbye (handspring reverse cazadora into a DDT). She prefers to put opponents away with her Adrenaline in Reverse—an over-the-shoulder O'Connor roll into the Cross Rhodes, performed in honor of her trainer.

In addition to testing new opponents in new locales, the 25-year-old Havok aims to one day "be a part of a major competitive women's division, wrestling the best." Given that, her fight-all-comers attitude should continue serving her well.

"I will always give wrestling 110% and bet on myself," she says. "If you're bigger than me, I will be quicker. If you're quicker, I'll be craftier. If you're smarter, I'll use my strength. I'll never back down from a challenge."

BRIGHT SIDE OF THE RING

All too often, tragic and unfortunate events receive a majority of press and attention when it comes to professional wrestling. Fortunately, there are plenty of inspirational moments and admirable achievements that outshine wrestling's dark.

Leila Grey, then OVW Women's champion, enters the ring at a June 2024 TV taping.

- In June 2023, Nikki Cross of WWE earned her master's degree in history from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. She is now working on her PhD, which she hopes to achieve in 2029.

- Former WWE champion Kofi Kingston and his mother launched a charity organization in Africa in 2023. The Click For Quality Education Foundation builds libraries and computer labs in undeveloped areas in Kingston's home country of Ghana.

- In November 2024, legendary luchador Rey Mysterio granted his 100th Make-A-Wish, visiting a fan in Phoenix, Arizona.

- In March 2025, AEW star Leila Grey married OVW standout Luke Kurtis. The pair were engaged in 2022 when Kurtis proposed during an OVW event.

- From an early age, TNA champ Joe Hendry was a budding musician. As teenagers, Hendry and his cousin performed music on the BBC 2 show *Smile*, covering songs by Nirvana and Blink 182.

- Last year, Bronson Reed was slated for a spot on WWE's Elimination Chamber show but skipped the event to be with his wife for the birth of their first child. After Reed announced his daughter's arrival, Triple H gave Reed a shout-out via social media, posting "You're exactly where you needed to be!"

- ECW original Beulah McGillicutty is now a children's author. In 2012, she published her first book, *Gertrude the Great*, under her real name, Trisa Laughlin. The book is about a little girl who wants to be just like her older sister.

LESSER-KNOWN WRESTLING TERRITORIES OF YESTERYEAR

Although wrestling's territory days are a thing of the past, there's still a lot of interest in that gritty and glorious period. While shows like *Tales from the Territories* have a lock on the bigger names of the day, we found info on some more obscure promotions of a bygone era.

▶ **JOHNNY CASH PRO WRESTLING:** Running shows from Cash's birthplace of Kingsland, Arkansas, all the way to Nashville, Tennessee, the promotion's cards featured fan-favorite grapplers like Johnny Yuma and A Boy Named Sue, as well as the villainous Sam Hall.

▶ **AREA 51 WRESTLING ASSOCIATION:** Very little is known about this territory, as fans were not allowed into the promotion's events and the roster was not made available to the public. Insiders said the show was really out of this world, though.

▶ **NORTH DUMPLING ISLAND WRESTLING:** Emanating from a two-acre micronation in Fishers Island Sound, the promotion set a record for indoor attendance when 93,172 fans packed the island's only building for the 1981 "Maritime Massacre" show. WrestleMania III broke the record with 93,173 attendees the following year.

▶ **CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING FROM DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME:** Spanning the East Coast and parts of the Midwest, the promotion couldn't maintain a sustained interest in storylines, as it only ran shows for six months out of the year.

▶ **OKEFENOKEE SWAMP TERRITORY:** Launched in the late-1940s, its best-known tag champs were an intellectual possum and a wisecracking alligator. The territory had a long-running but friendly rivalry with nearby Fort Mudge and Waycross.

30 YEARS FOR HOMICIDE

From the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn came a young upstart who seemed more likely to commit a felony than chart a legendary career that spanned three decades.

Homicide enters the ring at a 2023 Game Changer Wrestling event. After three decades in the sport, the recently retired "Notorious 187" had earned a reputation as one of the more respected men on the independents.
PHOTO BY SCOTT LESH

"THE NOTORIOUS 187" Homicide—an integral player during Ring of Honor's early years, one-half of TNA's groundbreaking **Latin American Xchange**, and a prolific competitor on the indie circuit—wrestled his retirement match at an Outlaw Wrestling show in Brooklyn on March 21, one day after his 48th birthday. Those in attendance expressed an outpouring of emotion, marking Homicide's last stand.

Shortly before the event, Homicide was diagnosed with a cyst on his brain. Three decades of ring warfare were thought to be a contributing factor.

"Can't believe I'm saying goodbye—not just to a job, but to my passion, the sport of pro wrestling ... I've had it for months and it's getting worse," Homicide posted on Facebook. "My vision, speech are bad [due to] hard hits, getting knocked out, and then hopping on a plane to travel ... I'm a survivor. I always win my battles. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for your support. This is not goodbye. This is 'See you later.'"

Homicide hand-picked his partner and opponents for his final bout, as he teamed with **Bull James** to defeat **Afa Jr.** and Homicide's protege, **Mike Santana**.

Born **Nelson Erazo**, he earned many athletic accolades in high school and turned down a scholarship to the University of Miami, opting to be trained by **Manny Fernandez** in New Jersey ahead of his 1993 wrestling debut. Known as **The Latin Terror** before changing his ring name to Homicide, he enjoyed multiple Jersey All Pro Wrestling heavyweight title reigns between 1999 and 2005, feuding with proteges **Dan Maff** and **Low Ki**, as well as **Jay Lethal** and **Teddy Hart**.

His Cop Killa finishing maneuver and his streetwise outspokenness courted controversy while creating fans. And he personified the spirit of New York's Puerto Rican community.

Homicide was on the very first Ring of Honor card on February 23, 2002, teaming with **Boogalou** as **The Natural Born Sinners**. When Boogalou defected to Xtreme Pro Wrestling, **Steve Corino** stepped in as his new partner, but a disagreement led to Corino turning on him.

Homicide and Corino feuded for four years. And Homicide scored key wins over **Christopher Daniels** and **CM Punk** in ROH. He went toe-to-toe with more notables, including **AJ Styles**, **Bryan Danielson**, and **Adam Pearce**. After unsuccessfully challenging ROH champion **Samoa Joe**, he finally succeeded in defeating Danielson for the title in 29:12 at Final Battle 2006.

While Homicide's reign lasted less than two months, he defended against **Chris Hero**, Samoa Joe, and **Jimmy Rave** before losing the title to **Takeshi Morishima**. By this time, he and **Scott Hernandez**—under the guidance of **Konnan**—had established themselves as The Latin American

John Cena is given the signal by The Rock to attack Cody Rhodes at Elimination Chamber in Toronto. PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

Xchange, with LAX winning the NWA tag team title twice and the TNA belts on one occasion.

He returned to JAPW for one of his biggest wins, over **Jushin "Thunder" Liger**, in 2010. In recent years, Homicide charted a distinguished 237-day reign as NWA World junior heavyweight champion and waged hard-fought battles against **Will Ospreay** and **Tom Lawlor** in NJPW STRONG.

WWE superstar CM Punk posted photos of the two of them together, stating, "Homicide. One of a kind. Thinking about my friend and his career today. He will leave his fingerprints all over the wrestling landscape. I'm there in spirit, my friend!"

In a show of support, TNA posted some of LAX's greatest matches on YouTube, including a wild one against **Beer Money (Bobby Roode & James Storm)**.

Speaking of CM Punk, he also had warm words for **Chris Bey**, who suffered a neck injury that left him paralyzed in the ring last October. Doctors gave the former X division champion only a 25-percent chance of walking again. Punk told Bey that statistic "only applied to humans, and you're not human."

Indeed, in February, TNA posted footage of Bey walking. He thanked Punk for his encouragement.

"I had to put my whole life in perspective," Bey told YouTube personality **Chris Van Vliet**. "I've had a less-percent chance of becoming a professional wrestler and landing on TV, you know? I've had a lot less odds with everything that I've done in my life up to this point, so who's to say I can't beat this one? Once I realized that, once that 24 to 48 hours were over [after the diagnosis], it was 'go time.'"

Something less inspirational coming out of TNA is the recent behavior of **Nic Nemeth**. Tremendously popular upon arriving from WWE, Nemeth felt that fans abandoned him during his recent World title loss to **Joe Hendry**, and Director of Authority **Santino Marella** slapped him with a four-week suspension for superkicking him during an altercation with **Jake Something**.

Meanwhile, younger brother **Ryan Nemeth** polluted Nic's mind leading up to a 10-man steel cage match at Sacrifice on TNA+. **Matt Hardy** led Nemeth, Hendry, **Elijah** (formerly **Elias**), and **Leon Slater** to a win over **Eddie Edwards**, **Brian Myers**, **Eddie & Orlando Colon**, and **JDC**. Ryan Nemeth joined brother Nic and Matt Hardy in the cage as the show was about to conclude, leading to the Nemeths bruising and bloodying Hardy's face against the steel.

The Nemeth Brothers, who are now ridiculously claiming to be the greatest tag team of all-time, are clearly targeting the World tag team belts worn by The Hardys.

Like it or not, Nic Nemeth seemed more justified in turning on the fans than **John Cena**, who explained his actions during a live *WWE Monday Night Raw* on March 17 in Brussels, Belgium. Cena, WWE's "Monarch Of Merch" during the past two decades,

Chris Bey has been working hard to bounce back from a debilitating injury that nearly left him paralyzed. CM Punk (and many others) shared kind words and well wishes for Bey as he continues his recovery. PHOTO COURTESY TNA WRESTLING

David Finlay poses backstage with his newly won New Japan Cup trophy.

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was wearing a new, Brussels-themed "Last Time Is Now" T-shirt.

Yet Cena's heel turn has begged the question: How will this affect his merchandise sales?

He employed interesting reverse psychology during his March 17 promo, acting incensed by fans sporting his official apparel, disdainfully pointing out those in the crowd who happened to be wearing John Cena T-shirts. This seems like thin logic, as does his entire heel turn. (For further venting on this topic, check out my "Win, Lose, Or Draw" column in this issue!)

At the Brussels event alone, Belgian-themed T-shirts, caps, and socks featuring Cena were available, and WWE Shop listed a John Cena title belt in the colors of the Belgian flag for $699.99! And more merchandise based on his new heel persona is being posted daily.

That's "Hustle, Loyalty, And Respect" for you, with an emphasis on hustle.

Congratulations to **David Finlay**, who defeated **Shota Umino** to win the New Japan Cup on March 20 in Nagaoka. Finlay beat **EVIL**, **Yuya Uemura**, and **Zack Sabre Jr.**—as Umino bested **Great-O-Khan**, **Jeff Cobb**, and **Shingo Takagi**—to reach the tournament final. Finlay's spear was impressive, and Umino's running knee and lariats were nearly career-ending, but Finlay's Into Oblivion finisher (a vertical suplex into a kneelift) proved the most devastating, with the next-generation star scoring the pinfall at the 28-minute mark.

Finlay also secured a shot at IWGP World champion **Hirooki Goto** at Sakura Genesis on April 5. Also noteworthy, Goto teamed with **Hontai** partners **Boltin Oleg** and **El Desperado** to defeat **TMDK** members **Zack Sabre Jr.**, **Hartley Jackson**, and **Ryohei Oiwa**, while **Hiroshi Tanahashi** continued his "Final Road" tour with a pinfall over **Satoshi Kojima** in a scintillating bout.

Factional warfare only intensified at the show, with David Finlay and his **Bullet Club War Dogs**, Shota Umino possibly looking to form his own group, along with **Los Ingobernables de Japon**, **United Empire**, **House of Torture**, and Hontai, oh my! We'll need a flowchart to track all of this.

Revolution pleased diehard AEW fans on March 9. Held at the Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles, Revolution was packed with three hours of incredible matches. Women's World champion **Toni Storm's** brutal victory over former champ **Mariah May** was easily the best—and most harrowing—bout of the night. Ice buckets and a broken champagne bottle came into bloody play, and Storm repeatedly gouged May with the heel of her shoe to beat a win out of her.

World heavyweight champion **Jon Moxley's** penchant for violence and gore has marred his title reign, and that was evident in his defense against **Adam Copeland** in the main event, although there was a last-minute twist with **Christian Cage** cashing in his title shot to turn the affair into a three-way. Soon after, however, Moxley choked out Cage to seize the victory.

Swerve Strickland was waiting for Moxley as he made his way to the back, surprising the champion with a dive off a guardrail. Even with Cage out of the picture, Moxley, Copeland, and Strickland have a long way to go to sort this out.

In other bouts at Revolution, Will Ospreay pinned **Kyle Fletcher** in a frighteningly bloody steel cage match ... **Kenny Omega** defeated **Konosuke Takeshita** for the International title ... World tag team champions **The Hurt Syndicate** stopped **The Outrunners** ... Continental champion **Kazuchika Okada** floored **Brody King** with a Rainmaker ... Swerve Strickland defeated **Ricochet** to earn a World title shot ... TBS champion **Mercedes Mone** forced **Momo Watanabe** into submission ... **"Hangman" Adam Page** dropped **MJF** with a Buckshot Lariat for the win.

Two years after suffering a stroke, **Jerry Lawler** spoke with longtime friend **Bill Apter** in an interview for Sportskeeda WrestleBinge. "The King" noted that his right knee was replaced six months ago, and his left knee will be replaced next year, compounding his mobility issues.

"The effects of the stroke, they're always there," said Lawler. "I mean, my whole right side of my body is damaged, and I can't really write too good. I can't draw worth a darn, but I can still sign an autograph, thank goodness."

This 'n' that: **Nikki Bella**, inspired by her recent showing in the Women's Royal Rumble, says she is capable of becoming a champion again—despite her previous neck injury, being a mom, and her age ... Women's World champion **Athena** defeated English star **Alex Windsor** at ROH Global Wars ... Women's North American champion **Stephanie Vaquer** won **Giulia's** NXT title at *NXT's* "Roadblock" special ... Due to overwhelming ticket demand, MLW has moved its upcoming L.A.-area Battle Riot event to the Thunder Studios Arena in nearby Long Beach, California.

We send our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of **Graham Michael**, who collapsed and died during a bout for Ohio's Xtreme Valley Wrestling, where—as **Artist Artest**—he was the Next Gen champion. "Beyond devastated and emotionally spent," posted trainer **Sami Callihan** on X. "Graham was one of the most genuine and kind-hearted people around."

Another beloved member of the independent wrestling community, veteran **Vince Steele**, tragically passed away following a cardiac emergency suffered at a show in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey. Joining other wrestling figures on social media, **Prince Nana** lamented the loss of Steele, calling him "a great guy."

Bill Mercer, truly a historic figure, passed away on March 24 at the ripe old age of 99. Mercer was a reporter for KRLD in Dallas during the assassination of **President John F. Kennedy**, and, after receiving a tip from a police officer, informed **Lee Harvey Oswald** that he was being charged with JFK's murder. Mercer was also the soothing voice of calm amid the triumphs and tragedies of *World Class Championship Wrestling* in the 1980s. Godspeed, Mr. Mercer.

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me.

NEWS ANALYSIS

HARRY BURKETT highlights **HOMICIDE** and **CHRIS BEY**, both determined to triumph over tragedy, and **BILL MERCER**, who saw plenty of both during his 99 years.

HUMBLE HOMICIDE

It's hard to believe that someone with the name and persona of Homicide, and a finisher called the Cop Killa, would become a beloved figure. Much of Homicide's edge was for entertainment purposes. I appreciated his reign as NWA junior heavyweight champ, when he wore with pride a belt dedicated to Danny Hodge, Verne Gagne, and other greats. Deal with your issue, Homicide, and come back to the industry that reveres you.

THE ULTIMATE FINESSER

Chris Bey is earning his nickname, trying to finesse his horrific setback into an awe-inspiring comeback. He's literally taking one step at a time, mastering the skill of walking before he seriously thinks about an in-ring return. Let's hope he doesn't end up like Darren Drozdov or Magnum T.A. and see his career cut short by a spinal injury. Drozdov, in particular, suffered a freak accident like Bey's. Thank goodness for his progress so far.

BLOODSPORT

I'm not necessarily anti-blood in wrestling because I've seen it complement some dramatic moments. And, with his deathmatch background, I understand AEW champ Jon Moxley's attraction to grisly violence, but Toni Storm maiming Mariah May with a broken champagne bottle? Will Ospreay raking a barbed-wire baseball bat across Kyle Fletcher's forehead? AEW stars are too athletic and entertaining to rely so much on this barbarism.

WITNESS TO HISTORY

Bill Mercer appeared on a *CBS Saturday Morning* segment commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. He was the reporter who, on camera in the basement of Dallas Police Headquarters, informed Lee Harvey Oswald that he was about to be charged for murdering the President. What could have better prepared Mercer for reporting the Von Erich deaths and other World Class tragedies than the JFK assassination?

LIKE GENE HACKMAN

From overbooked shows to overpriced tickets, Senior Writer **AL CASTLE** takes aim at them all in his tribute to one of cinema's leading bad guys.

The "Hollywood Ending" match between Toni Storm and Mariah May had all the drama and action fans want from a pay-per-view main event. Why, then, was it relegated to the mid-card at AEW Revolution? PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE DINH

IN HOLLYWOOD, AS IN wrestling, the people who can most convincingly portray a dastardly villain are sometimes the biggest sweethearts. And perhaps nobody personified that contradiction better than Gene Hackman. Over a 50-year career, the Academy Award-winning legend made moviegoers loathe him as Lex Luthor and Sheriff "Little Bill" Daggett, all the while earning a reputation off-screen as a kind, humble, and generous man.

So, John Cena, as you try to figure out how to navigate portraying a dirtbag on television while remaining a good dude in real life, the late Gene Hackman is a good starting point. Here's a "Quick Count" tribute to the recently deceased acting giant.

UNFORGIVEN

Addressing his confounding decision not to have the Women's World title match go on in the main-event slot at Revolution, AEW boss Tony Khan struck an apologetic tone, saying "hindsight's always 20/20."

Apology not accepted. This is not a case of Monday morning quarterbacking. The rubber match between Toni Storm and Mariah May should have been the obvious pick to close out the March 8 event, especially given the unique "Hollywood Ending" match stipulation. As the "Timeless" one lay victorious on top of May centerstage, the words "The End" fittingly appeared on a screen behind them. It was a satisfying climax to AEW's hottest feud of the last year.

And it went on fourth-to-last.

Six years into its existence, AEW has yet to headline a pay-per-view with women, despite more than once having a women's match with far more fan intrigue than the main event men's match. That was certainly the case at Revolution 2025.

Khan had the opportunity to make a real statement by having one of the biggest women's matches in AEW history headline a pay-per-view during Women's History Month. Save your "If I knew then what I know now ..." You did know it.

EXTREME MEASURES

The mid-show match placement wasn't the only way Toni Storm and Mariah May were done a disservice at Revo-

Jade Cargill makes a surprise return at Elimination Chamber in Toronto, where she took revenge against Naomi. While the show was largely seen as successful, it may have minimized the impact of February's Royal Rumble. PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

lution. Just a few minutes after the two women had one of the bloodiest, most violent grudge matches in the company's history, Will Ospreay and Kyle Fletcher had another.

What's more extreme than a "May Day" back-first slam onto broken glass? How about a face-first "Styles Clash" onto thumbtacks? You want to beat your opponent in the head with the heel of a shoe? Well, I'll stab my opponent repeatedly with a screwdriver.

For better or worse, AEW has long had to fight off criticism for being a "blood and guts" promotion that relies too heavily on needlessly dangerous stunts. While it may be true that the intensity of both the Storm-May feud and Ospreay-Fletcher feud warranted a blood-soaked climax, there's no reason why one of those climaxes couldn't wait for another show.

AEW would have been ill-advised to put these two matches on in the same month, much less the same night.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

While All Elite Wrestling made some major errors in how it arranged its matches at Revolution, the most questionable decision made at WWE's most recent premium live event was apparent before the first match got underway: having someone sing "The Star-Spangled Banner."

When WWE booked Toronto's Rogers Centre for this year's Elimination Chamber, it couldn't have known that the U.S. and Canada would be locked in a trade war that would create considerable resentment on both sides of the border. But that resentment was already well-established by the time the March 1 show came around, as evidenced by many a Canadian NHL crowd booing the United States' national anthem at recent games.

Still, WWE color commentator Pat McAfee appeared downright gobsmacked when he witnessed the Canadian crowd's hostile reaction to singer Elizabeth Irving's rendition of the Francis Scott Key classic. Lashing out, he dismissed all of Canada as "a terrible country." This didn't make things better.

For the foreseeable future, it may be best if the first thing uttered into a microphone at a WWE event held in Canada is "The following match is scheduled for one fall ..."

THE CHAMBER

Of course, the featured attraction of the Elimination Chamber event was the eponymous structure that, once conquered, assures the victor a main-event spot at WrestleMania.

Wait a minute. Isn't that what the Royal Rumble is for?

Indeed, while Charlotte Flair and Jey Uso each earned world title opportunities at WrestleMania by outlasting 29 other competitors at the Rumble, the truth is that neither Uso-Gunther nor Flair-Tiffany Stratton will likely be billed ahead of the world title matches that were born out the Chamber match results. Those bouts were expected to be John Cena vs. Cody Rhodes, and a three-way bout featuring Bianca Belair, Iyo Sky, and Rhea Ripley.

The marquee value of those bouts may help establish the Elimination Chamber as the most important stop on the "Road To WrestleMania," but it also takes a little sheen off the Rumble.

A potential compromise: a 30-person Elimination Chamber match. Although I can't imagine you could fit that many pods around the ring.

THE HEIST

Ten years after Seth Rollins pulled off "the heist of the century" at WrestleMania 31, WWE may top it with an even bigger theft at this year's big show—that of fans' ticket-buying dollars.

As of press time, a two-night pass for WrestleMania 41 will cost you a minimum of around $1,000. And that's for the worst seats in the house. It's a shocking increase over recent WrestleMania ticket prices, including last year's WrestleMania 40, where you could have gotten a two-night pass for around $600.

Add to that record-high prices for other WWE events over 'Mania weekend, including *Smackdown, Raw,* the Hall of Fame induction ceremony, NXT Stand & Deliver, and the WWE World fan convention, and you've priced many a middle-class family out of taking part in wrestling's biggest weekend.

The last time Las Vegas saw this brazen a caper, it involved Danny Ocean and 10 of his closest friends.

TELEVISED REVOLUTION

It's been a long and eventful road to NXT for **RICKY SAINTS (RICKY STARKS)**.

Ricky Starks poses with the DEFY championship belt after winning it from KENTA. Upon signing with WWE, Starks would go on to vacate the title. PHOTO BY TRIPP PAGE

I'M NOT GOING TO LIE: "Ricky Saints" will take some getting used to. But what I have no problem getting used to again is seeing the man still known to his family as Ricky Starks on my television screen on a regular basis.

I've been in his corner for a while now. I first took notice of him back in the hopeful days of the relaunched NWA in 2018, when he burst on the scene and soon became the first holder of the first independently established NWA World Television championship. He had a natural charisma, was dynamic in the ring, and was one hell of a promo. It was one of those moments when you think, *This guy is going places.*

And so he did. He first popped up in All Elite Wrestling—not quite at the very beginning, but close—showing up on *Dynamite* as a surprise challenger to then-TNT champion Cody Rhodes. As it turned out, he was one of Rhodes' personal projects, like MJF and Darby Allin ... people who the former AEW EVP saw great potential in, and personally picked to be members of the company's roster. To those who had seen him before, it wasn't hard to understand why.

Starks would spend five years with the promotion, although you'd be forgiven if you thought it was only four, since he was completely invisible for that final year. It was an erratic era in his career, and never quite amounted to what many had hoped for it. The reasons are complicated, and still mainly known only to those directly involved.

Perhaps it can be traced to when his mentor, Rhodes, made that fateful jump back to WWE in 2022. And as "The American Nightmare" ascended, a bigger star than ever in his old company, and went on to become the face of it, it's understandable that someone like Ricky Starks would imagine what it would be like to join him there. After all, Starks seemed to struggle once Rhodes was gone, with a series of stop-and-start pushes from Tony Khan that left his fans increasingly frustrated.

There was no doubt that Starks was a "Cody Rhodes Guy." And we can speculate all we want about what else may have hurt his chances in AEW. For one, he also seemed to be a "CM Punk Guy." He was one of the wrestlers who benefited most from working with Punk in AEW, and has always had glowing things to say about the "Second City Saint"—even after he fell afoul of the AEW political machine and later parted ways with the company. With Punk gone the way of Rhodes, anyone who was a disciple of both might not be seen in the best light by the promotion.

Then, there was that clearly unscripted promo battle with the newly arrived Adam Copeland in fall 2023. On live television, Starks seemed to embarrass the former Edge—a major new acquisition for AEW—and whether

Ricky Saints sends Ridge Holland flying during his first singles match for NXT.

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it was connected or not, it seemed obvious to his fans that he was less prominent than ever on AEW TV after it happened. He had just won the AEW World tag team title with Big Bill—his first official title in the company. But being relegated to a tag team felt like a demotion.

The last few months of Starks' active tenure saw him decidedly lost in the shuffle, and the tag team title itself devalued as much as it had ever been in AEW … until he and Bill finally dropped it to Sting & Darby Allin in February. Starks wasn't seen again on television for eight weeks, when he and Big Bill lost a quick match to Top Flight. Although it wasn't known at the time, that would be Ricky Starks' final AEW appearance.

What many believe to be the last nail in the coffin came the following week, when Starks, perhaps emboldened by his sad position in AEW—or perhaps just wanting to support his old mentor—made the brazen decision to fly out to Philadelphia and be at the side of Cody Rhodes for WrestleMania Weekend, as Rhodes prepared for what was to be his coronation as the new WWE champion.

We can't know if this was the last straw for Tony Khan, and Khan's nimble avoidance of pithy answers whenever such hard-hitting questions are posed to him renders it unlikely we'll ever know for sure. But after those infamous pictures surfaced of Starks, an AEW contracted talent, palling around backstage at WrestleMania, he was permanently put into mothballs by the AEW president.

For months, fans wondered what had happened to him. Starks himself could only give veiled answers, insisting he wasn't injured and was perfectly willing to work, but couldn't properly explain why he was off TV. His frustration was easy to see. Over time, he began making waves with some independent appearances, turning up in Game Changer Wrestling, House of Glory, and DEFY, where he even won the heavyweight title in February. He also wasn't afraid to speak his mind, giving public voice to his displeasure with being forced to sit things out. The result was that he was pulled from future GCW appearances, a relatively unprecedented move for the usually indie-friendly AEW.

In short, by the time Starks was finally released by AEW on February 10, he couldn't wait to get the hell out. After all, he'd reportedly been begging to be released for well over a year by that point. And the very next day after his release, he made his first appearance in NXT, which tells you everything you need to know.

There are no guarantees in wrestling. There's no certainty that Ricky Saints in NXT—and presumably, eventually the main WWE roster—will do any better than Ricky Starks in AEW. But it's clearly where he wants to be. And, so far, he's been able to make an instant impact on the black-and-gold brand. It feels like a hopeful reset, and I for one am glad to see the revolution televised again.

BY HARRY BURKETT

ROCK TO CENA: HEEL THYSELF!

Whether or not **JOHN CENA** beats **CODY RHODES** for the Undisputed title at WrestleMania, his decision to sell his soul to "The Final Boss" will be questioned for decades to come.

"AFTER THIS"
U C ME

John Cena turns his back on the press at the Elimination Chamber scrum, just as he had turned his back on the fans moments earlier. Harry Burkett remains confounded by Cena's recent heel turn—as well as the superstar's subsequent explanation for it.

PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

"I AM NOT A babyface. I am not a heel. I am a human being." That declaration, made by John Cena on the March 17 edition of *Raw,* is bound to go down as one of the most notorious quotes in wrestling history.

"And each and every one of you has been awful to me!" Okay, what started out as the wrestling equivalent of "December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy" quickly degenerated into what a sniveling little brother would say in a crying fit in the family kitchen.

I'm not buying this heel turn. I saw the motivation 10 to 15 years ago, when preteens were keeping Cena on top in terms of merchandise sales and fans over age 20 were blasting him with "Cena Sucks" chants. Turning heel would've made perfect sense during his 2011 feud with CM Punk over the WWE championship.

Yet, Cena didn't want to disappoint the Make-A-Wish kids. And Vince McMahon didn't want to risk his very lucrative revenue stream.

But in 2025? Cena is amid his "Last Time Is Now" retirement tour, vowing this year's WrestleMania will be his last. He has successfully transitioned into the role of movie star—and most definitely will be a viable TV celebrity and pitchman for years to come.

His St. Patrick's Day promo sounded like fake outrage. He had seemingly accepted the "Cena Sucks" chants as Kurt Angle had embraced "Angle Sucks" chants years prior.

Plus, the "Cena Sucks" chants had died down during his occasional appearances over the past few years. Why? Because Cena had gone from being "Big Match John" to the classy veteran doing the right thing: losing.

It started at SummerSlam 2014, when Brock Lesnar rag-dolled Cena with 16 German suplexes to win the WWE title. The big defeats became a regular occurrence by 2020, with losses to The Fiend at WrestleMania 38, Roman Reigns at SummerSlam 2021, Austin Theory at 'Mania 39, and Solo Sikoa at Crown Jewel 2023.

He also fell at this year's Royal Rumble, as Jey Uso eliminated him to earn a world-title shot at WrestleMania 41.

Planned or not, losing is very real, impacting a star's reputation and marketability. Cena should have addressed *that* in his March 17 promo. If Cena hadn't made it painfully obvious that he was passing the torch—particularly against Theory—then his losing streak would've been even more embarrassing.

Nonetheless, that approach would've rung true. Cena could've made a legitimate case that he had put too much into the business to go out a loser, that he deserved to surpass Ric Flair as a 17-time world champion. And, sure, the man with a dozen classic cars in his garage is enough of a mark to want the ultimate wrestling trophy case.

Since Jey Uso had already picked World champion Gunther as his Wrestle-

Cena clobbers Cody Rhodes with the WWE championship belt as The Rock looks on. Perhaps it's the dogged pursuit of a 17th world title—and not the occasional jeers from fans—that have truly motivated his change of heart. PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

Mania opponent, then Cena would need to beat Undisputed champ Cody Rhodes to accomplish his goal. I hope this theme emerges before WrestleMania on Easter Weekend.

Maybe fans who never experienced wrestling before John Cena are in such a state of shock and anger that I'm underestimating the value of this turn. It's true that no one really saw it coming.

I must compare it to the gold standard of heel turns, Hulk Hogan turning on Randy Savage and Sting to join The Outsiders, Scott Hall and Kevin Nash, at Bash at the Beach 1996. "You can call this the New World Order of wrestling, *brother*" will always have more resonance with me than "I'm a human being" or "You have treated me awful."

Popular main-eventers rarely turned heel before the Monday Night War. No one had fathomed Hogan going bad, though it immediately made sense. Hogan was struggling in WCW, as he had come to struggle in WWE. Fans had seen him on top for too long and winning too often, much like Cena of 2005-15. He even dallied with heelish tendencies during a match against Sting on *Monday Nitro*.

Hogan in 1996 desperately wanted to be accepted as WCW's top star. Cena is an occasional attraction who has already announced his retirement. Again, I ask: What is the motive? Unless he's planning to bring down The Rock from the inside, it doesn't make sense.

The most emotional heel turn I've seen was Larry Zbyszko betraying his mentor, Bruno Sammartino. Nearly a decade earlier, Zbyszko had approached Sammartino in the backyard of his Pittsburgh home, asking the legend to train a kid he'd never seen before. Zbyszko went on to wrestle on the mid-card throughout the 1970s, under Sammartino's tutelage and firmly in his shadow.

Zbyszko calmly reasoned that he had to face Sammartino to gain credibility in the sport. On WWF programming, announcer Vince McMahon went out of his way to explain Zbyszko's point of view.

Sammartino wasn't blameless. When their teacher-student match took place on television, the former WWWF champion embarrassed Zbyszko, releasing holds quickly and immediately backing off, as if he didn't consider him a serious threat. That led to a resentful Zbyszko bloodying Sammartino with a wooden chair at their steel-cage match at Showdown at Shea in the summer of 1980.

The motivation was there for all to see.

A little murkier, but memorable nonetheless, was Barry Windham turning on Lex Luger during their NWA World tag team title defense against Arn Anderson and Tully Blanchard. In a bout shown on both *World Championship Wrestling* and the syndicated *Worldwide Wrestling* in April 1988, Windham stunned everyone by powerslamming and clotheslining Luger, sacrificing the tag team belts to The Four Horsemen.

Horsemen manager James J. Dillon was in Windham's ear throughout the match, with a mix of pleas and threats, as Windham seemed to be losing patience with Luger. The match itself helped to set up the heel turn. I remember wondering how much money the Horsemen must have paid Windham to give up the belts. It was a moot point, however, as Windham was wearing U.S. heavyweight gold within a month.

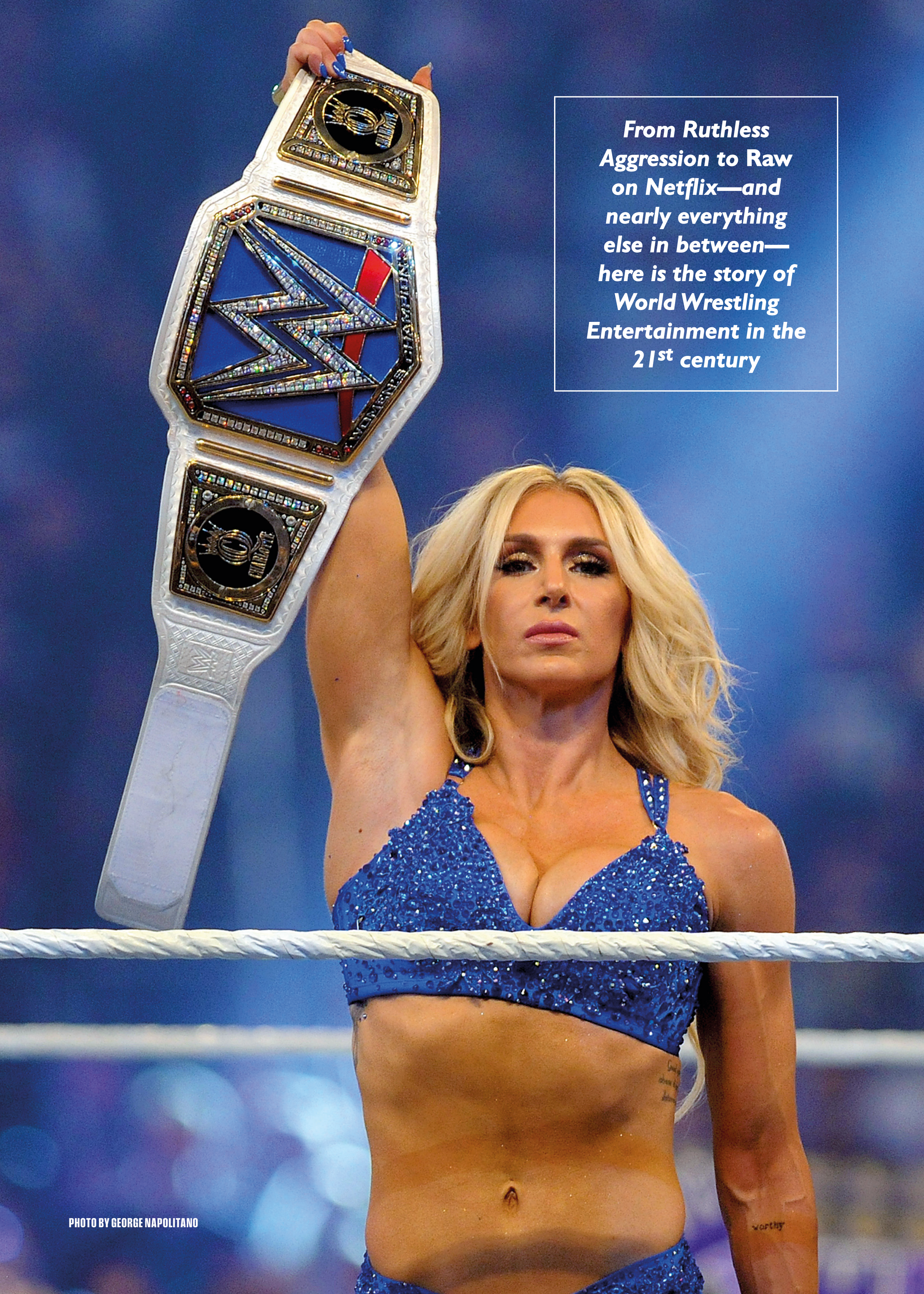
Longtime readers of *PWI* will remember when rulebreaking—the counter to scientific wrestling—was considered a philosophy, a sort of lifestyle choice. Columnist Dan Shocket touted this win-at-any-cost mentality as the noble path, while fan favorites were either cowards or suckers. Or, in the case of Bob Backlund, protected by the system.

We don't talk much about scientific wrestlers vs. rulebreakers anymore. Now, we talk about babyfaces and heels. But as John Cena reminded us, they're all human beings.

TEXT BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

THE WWE ERA

HOW WRESTLING'S BIGGEST COMPANY "GOT THE F OUT" AND BECAME BIGGER THAN EVER



From Ruthless Aggression to Raw on Netflix—and nearly everything else in between—here is the story of World Wrestling Entertainment in the 21st century

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

THE GIGANTIC PRO WRESTLING monolith that today we know as WWE has gone through several name changes over its more than 70-year history. Old-school fans certainly know that when it first rose to prominence as a national powerhouse back in the ’80s, it was called the World Wrestling Federation, or WWF. In fact, it had been known by that name going back to the spring of 1979. And when the changeover happened to “World Wrestling Entertainment” back in May 2002, it took a lot of getting used to.

Yet, incredible as it may seem to long-time fans, June 2025 marks a significant milestone: The company has been known as WWE for a *longer* period of time than it was ever called the WWF.

Let that sink in.

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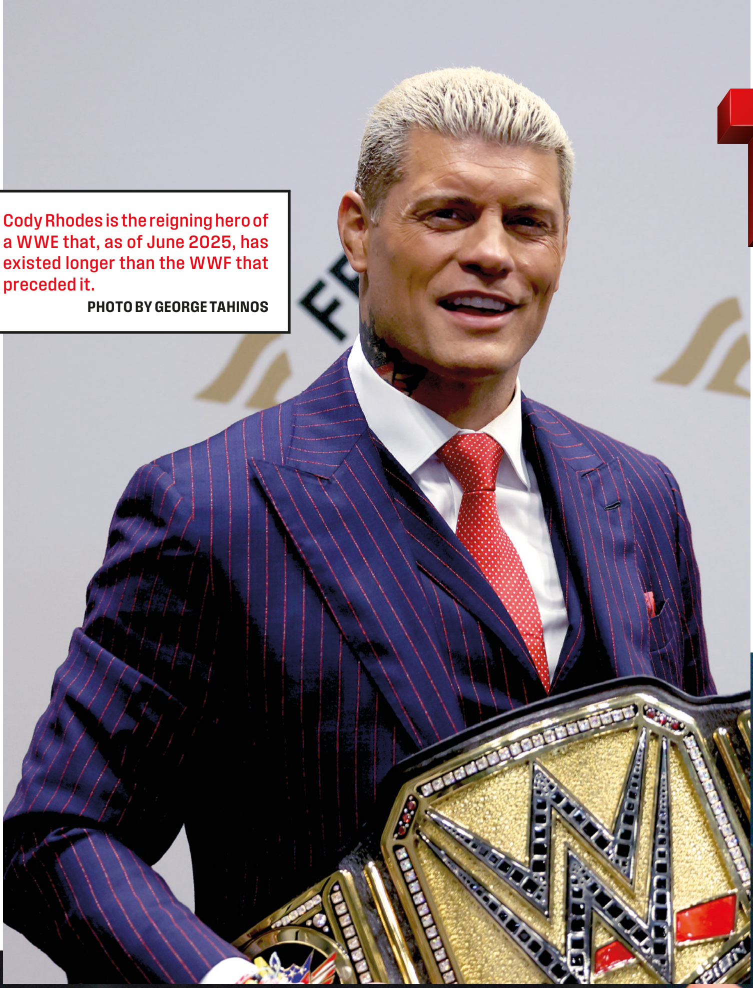
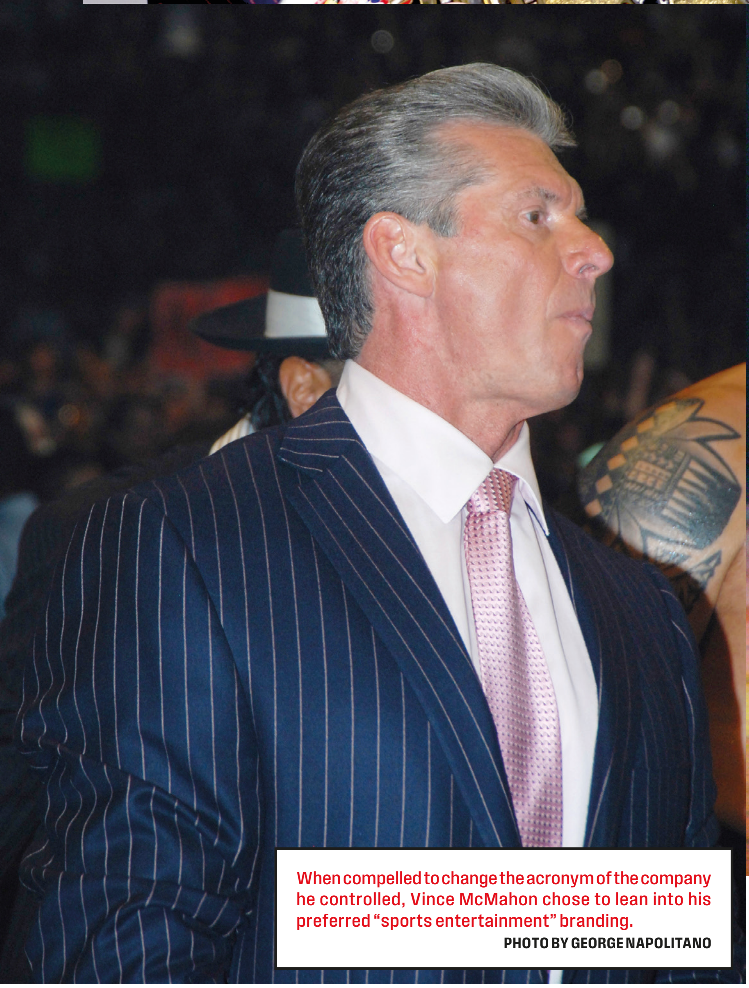


Cody Rhodes is the reigning hero of a WWE that, as of June 2025, has existed longer than the WWF that preceded it.

PHOTO BY GEORGE TAHINOS

In the years after WCW and ECW shuttered, Booker T and Rob Van Dam emerged as two of WWE’s most popular performers.

PHOTO BY AL BELLO



When compelled to change the acronym of the company he controlled, Vince McMahon chose to lean into his preferred “sports entertainment” branding.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

JOHN CENA: THE FACE THAT RAN THE PLACE

ALTHOUGH HE FADED SOMEWHAT from the picture for most of the current decade (his 2025 retirement tour and white-hot heel turn notwithstanding), Cena has been, more than anyone else, the dominant wrestler of the WWE Era so far. Arriving on the main roster in 2002 at roughly the same time the company was changing its name, he stepped into the void left behind by some of the biggest names of the Attitude Era. He embodied the so-called Ruthless Aggression Era. And he continued his dominance well beyond, becoming the biggest star that WWE had produced since the heydays of The Rock and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin—and staying there much longer.

For at least 15 years, he was the unquestioned top global box-office attraction in WWE, and that's something that no one else can claim. Along the way, he captured a record-tying 16 world titles, earning a rightful spot on WWE's Mount Rushmore.

He was a divisive and polarizing figure, to be sure. Cena came along at a time when fans were more vocal and critical than ever, using social media and other online platforms to voice their opinions, both negative and positive. But there's no denying Cena's prominence.

Although others, including Brock Lesnar and Daniel Bryan, would emerge over the years to challenge his top spot, there was no WWE performer who could consistently claim to have eclipsed Cena until the rise of The Bloodline and Roman Reigns at the start of this decade. And that's an incredible accomplishment: solidifying John Cena as the embodiment of the company in its post-WWF existence.

John Cena clutches his World title belt, which he's just retained over Shawn Michaels at WrestleMania 23.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

(cont. from pg. 24)

Looking back over the past 23 years since that change went into effect, we see that this was far more than just a superficial letter replacement. There were dramatic shifts happening in the company at the time that coincided with that change. And so, there truly has been a "WWE Era"—an extended time period comprising most of the 21st Century—that stands separate from the formative years of the company in the late 20th Century.

MOST YOUNGER FANS TODAY only know the industry leader as WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment). This is a triumph of the company's powerful marketing machine, which succeeded in wiping away that "F" with extreme prejudice.

It was an aggressive rebranding, and it all started with one of the company's rare legal defeats. Ever since Vince McMahon had attempted to trademark the letters "WWF" when he first fully took over the company in 1983, he'd run into trouble from the World Wildlife Fund, the nature conservation organization that already owned the rights to those letters. For so many years, McMahon had been able to stave off the Fund with legal concessions, logos that obscured the lettering, and promises to refrain from using the letters on international tours—promises that were boldly broken.

Eventually, the Fund had had enough of the marketplace confusion and brought the hammer down, forcing McMahon to change the name. Since he'd been pushing his product as entertainment for decades anyway, he leaned even further in that direction, putting the word right there in the brand name for all to see. It would be "WWE" from then on.

And yet, it was already a time of great flux in the newly renamed company. The dizzying heights of the Attitude Era were now behind them, having arguably peaked with WrestleMania 17 the year before. The two biggest stars on the company's roster, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and The Rock, were just a year away from having what would be the final match for both of them as full-time wrestlers. D-Generation X had disbanded, with Triple H in the midst of a historic singles run and Shawn Michaels on the verge

Bryan Danielson (Daniel Bryan) wears down CM Punk as special guest ref Ricky Steamboat looks on. Both Danielson and Punk would soldier on from the Ring of Honor ranks to become top stars of the WWE Era.

PHOTO BY WAYNE McCARTY

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Jack Swagger grabs the coveted Money in the Bank briefcase, which guarantees an anytime-anywhere title shot to its holder. The stipulation, which was invented by Chris Jericho (below), was a Ruthless Aggression-age staple.

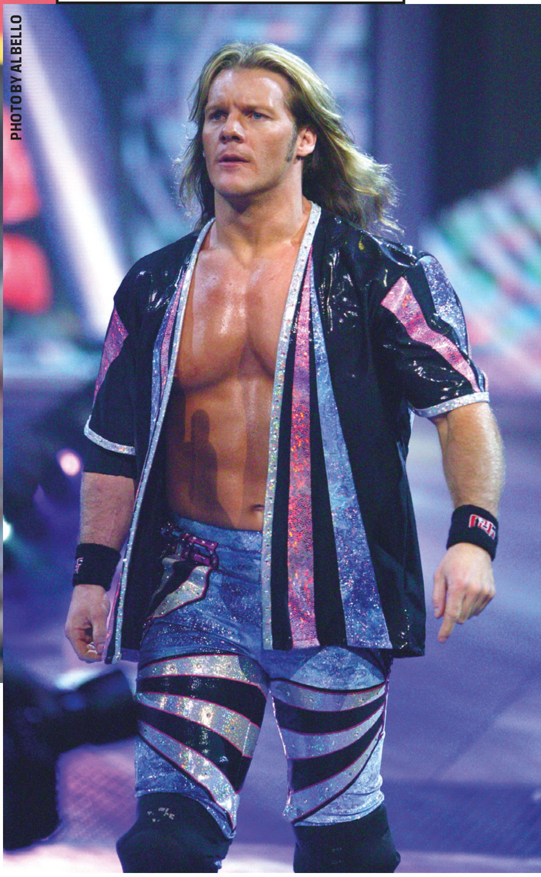


PHOTO BY AL BELLO

of a fan-favorite comeback. Mick Foley was retired, and The Undertaker had already reinvented himself as the "American Badass." Hulk Hogan, of all people, was experiencing the benefits of nostalgia with an unexpected late-career resurgence following the end of the NWO. It was clear that new blood was needed, as well as new ideas and new directions.

The years that immediately followed would see exactly that. In fact, people still talk about that incredible class of 2002, when WWE began to call up some of the promising young stars being coached in its developmental system.

That first wave included the likes of Randy Orton, Brock Lesnar, Batista, Shelton Benjamin, and the man who would become the greatest modern success story of all, John Cena. And that was only the beginning, as it started to feel like the somewhat stagnant roster was really being shaken up and moving past the Attitude Era into something new.

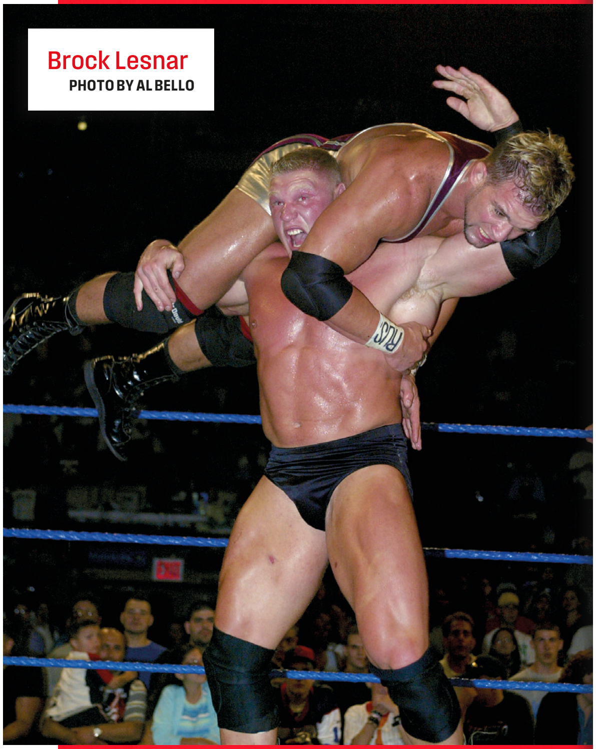
What that something new would actually be was a matter of debate. It became apparent that the anything-goes days of edgy boundary-pushing were being reined in. After all, there was no more WCW or ECW to compete against, and sponsors had long been pressuring the company to move away from the more extreme elements of the Attitude Era.

WHAT FOLLOWED WAS something that came to be known as the Ruthless Aggression Era, coined from a term that was first used by Vince McMahon in a memorable TV promo to the roster. In that segment, McMahon demanded that wrestlers step up and

23 MORE TOP WWE SUPERSTARS OF THE PAST 23 YEARS

Charlotte Flair & Becky Lynch
PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

- ROMAN REIGNS
- BROCK LESNAR
- DANIEL BRYAN
- TRIPLE H
- CODY RHODES
- THE UNDERTAKER
- CM PUNK
- REY MYSTERIO
- RANDY ORTON
- BECKY LYNCH
- AJ STYLES
- THE ROCK
- KURT ANGLE
- SHAWN MICHAELS
- SASHA BANKS
- CHRIS JERICHO
- BAYLEY
- CHARLOTTE FLAIR
- SETH ROLLINS
- RHEA RIPLEY
- EDGE
- BATISTA
- TRISH STRATUS



Brock Lesnar
PHOTO BY AL BELLO

WRESTLEMANIA:

BIGGER, BETTER, BADDER THAN EVER

The Undertaker's 21-match unbeaten streak at WrestleMania stands as one of the most impressive feats in company history.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

THE SO-CALLED "GRANDEST Stage of Them All" has become even grander over the past 23 years. It was already the company's premier event, totally reinventing what a pro wrestling spectacular could be. Yet, the transformations we've seen in the past couple of decades dwarf the original ambitions for the "Showcase Of The Immortals."

For one thing, the "Crown Jewel Of Pay-Per-View" became more than just a pay-per-view. It ballooned to a larger audience than ever after transitioning to a "premium live event" with the arrival of the WWE Network, starting with WrestleMania 30 (the "Daniel Bryan WrestleMania") in 2014.

Traditional arenas can't even contain it anymore. Starting with WrestleMania 23 at Detroit's Ford Field in 2007, the event has been held in a giant football stadium every year (except for the empty-arena, pandemic-era show in 2020). Beginning this decade, the show has expanded into a two-night mega-event.

WrestleMania 35 in 2019 made history with the first women's main event—a triple-threat involving Becky Lynch, Ronda Rousey, and Charlotte Flair. It happened again two years later with Bianca Belair and Sasha Banks.

And then, there was "The Streak." Undertaker's undefeated stretch at WrestleMania began back in 1991 with WrestleMania 7. But it was in the WWE Era that it truly became acknowledged as something special, growing all the way to 21-0 until that fateful night at WrestleMania 30 when Brock Lesnar shocked the world ... and created what may have been the most memorable moment in WrestleMania history.

Here's a look back at a baker's dozen incredible 'Mania matches of the past 23 years:

The Undertaker vs. Shawn Michaels — WrestleMania 25
The Rock vs. John Cena — WrestleMania 28
Kurt Angle vs. Shawn Michaels — WrestleMania 21
Roman Reigns vs. Cody Rhodes — WrestleMania 40
The Undertaker vs. Triple H — WrestleMania 28
Edge vs. Mick Foley — WrestleMania 22
The Usos vs. Kevin Owens & Sami Zayn — WrestleMania 39
Ric Flair vs. Shawn Michaels — WrestleMania 24
Kurt Angle vs. Brock Lesnar — WrestleMania 19
Daniel Bryan vs. Kofi Kingston — WrestleMania 35
Charlotte Flair vs. Rhea Ripley — WrestleMania 39
The Undertaker vs. CM Punk — WrestleMania 29
Sasha Banks vs. Bianca Belair — WrestleMania 37

Big E and Xavier Woods hoist the new WWE champ, Kofi Kingston, into the air.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

RAW vs. SMACKDOWN

Alicia Fox, Maryse, and Beth Phoenix prepare for a trios match at a 2010 Raw-brand house show.
PHOTO BY STU SAKS

WWE'S BRAND EXTENSION (as it was originally called) and the changing of the company's name went hand-in-hand, with the official brand split happening just six weeks before the demise of the "WWF" moniker. It was a radical move at the time, breaking up the WWE roster into two distinct groups and turning WWE's two weekly TV shows into competing rosters. Except for a five-year period from 2011 to 2016, it's been that way ever since.

The idea was to create internal competition at a time when the real competition, namely WCW and ECW, was gone. It was thought that WWE would grow stale as just a single monolithic force—and that unfortunately turned out to be true anyway, despite the brand extension.

The initial split brought with it the introduction of a second world title for the first time in WWE history, with the World heavyweight belt coming into play on Raw alongside the original WWE championship on Smackdown.

Even all these years later, the creative success of the brand extension is a topic of hot debate, with much of the company's flattest years of the 2000s and 2010s often chalked up to the lack of star-power on either show.

The brand extension also gave us the annual phenomenon known as the WWE Draft. Here are some of the most shocking draft moments over the years:

Roman Reigns to Smackdown in 2019. This paved the way for The Bloodline to emerge.

John Cena to Smackdown and Raw in 2011. Cena bounced from one show back to the other on the same night.

Lita to Raw in 2002. She was the first female draft pick and final pick of the original draft.

Triple H to Smackdown in 2004. This broke up Evolution for a brief time.

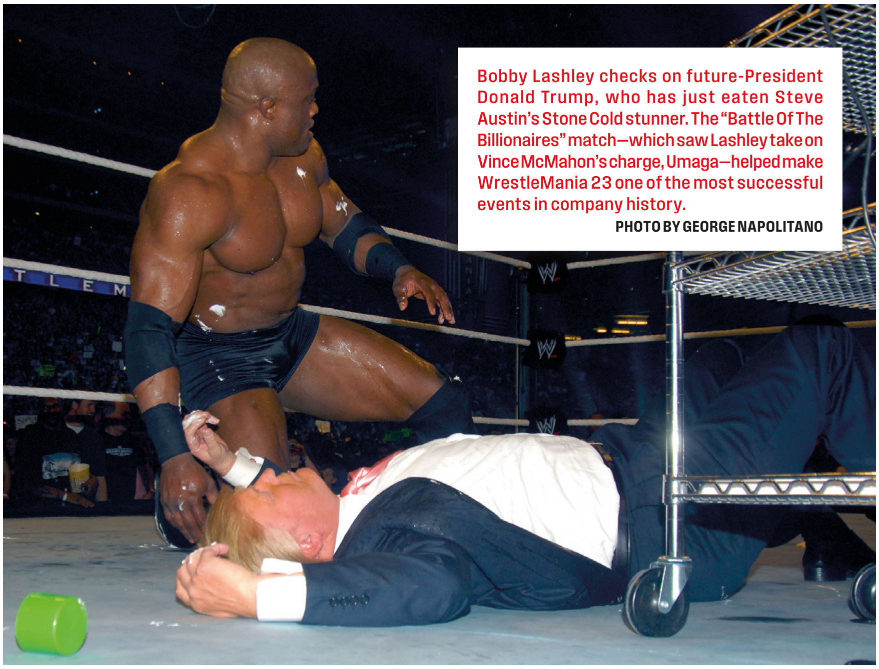
Finn Balor to Raw in 2016. He was drafted straight out of NXT in the first round.

Batista to Smackdown in 2005. "Big Dave" was drafted along with the World heavyweight title.

Kane to Raw in 2008. "The Big Red Machine" was selected while ECW champion.

make their presence felt in this new age. Pretty soon, the term was everywhere, notably used by John Cena himself.

But as the name made plain, this new era didn't represent a total abandonment of attitude, nor a return to the more child-friendly, milquetoast product of the mid-1990s. Rather, it represented a happy medium. WWE in those early years would still do plenty of boundary-pushing, but it would be tempered by more of an emphasis on the physicality that actually went on in the ring—less a *Jerry Springer Show* spectacle and more an intense physical drama that spotlighted the incredible athleticism of the wrestlers. Although the promotion had fallen from the booming business days of the late-1990s and early-2000s, the resulting product was, top-to-bottom, a better wrestling show.


Bobby Lashley checks on future-President Donald Trump, who has just eaten Steve Austin's Stone Cold stunner. The "Battle Of The Billionaires" match—which saw Lashley take on Vince McMahon's charge, Umaga—helped make WrestleMania 23 one of the most successful events in company history.
PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Nikki Bella, accompanied by her sister Brie, shows off the now-retired Divas championship belt. By way of their popular cable TV shows, *Total Divas* and *Total Bellas*, the Bella Twins helped make wrestling fans out of countless casual viewers.

PHOTO BY STU SAKS

Unfortunately for the company's stockholders, WWE would have to get used to those diminished returns in the years to come. It's easy to forget now, as the company is virtually printing money again, but there were many years during which WWE stagnated from a business standpoint. And that eventually took hold creatively, as well.

A lack of competition has often been cited as one of the greatest factors. New companies had arisen to take the places of WCW and ECW: most notably, NWA Total Non-Stop Action (TNA Wrestling), which seemed to be inheriting the mantle of WCW; and Ring of Honor, whose emphasis on daredevil style and in-ring artistry seemed to be borrowing certain aspects of ECW. But although they experienced a certain amount of success and growth, neither of those companies were ever a real threat to WWE's top spot as the dominant company in the industry. At times, they seemed to be quite a distant number two and three.

There's no doubt that most of the WWE Era represented the closest thing to a monopoly on professional wrestling, particularly in the United States and Canada, that the titular company had ever known.

THE SHIELD AND EVOLUTION:
THE FACES OF WWE'S FUTURE

The Shield displays impressive teamwork en route to victory at WrestleMania 29.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

NEITHER OF THEIR TENURES lasted very long in the grand scheme of things. And yet, in several ways, Evolution and The Shield are the two defining factions of the WWE Era, with the possible addition of The Bloodline to that list.

At a time when WWE was starved for main event superstars—and many of the stars of the past had left the scene—Evolution was a concerted effort to build new names using the influence and power of established ones. Ric Flair represented the past, and Evolution actually helped to prolong his career while adding a new chapter of relevance in his final, fully active years. Triple H represented the present, using Evolution as a springboard to keep himself at the top of the food chain.

And then there were Randy Orton and Batista, the two guys whose careers were made thanks to their affiliation with the group. Orton would go on to become one of the most important, consistent WWE main-eventers of the next 20 years. And even though Batista was not as consistently a part of WWE, there was a time when he rivaled John Cena as the company's top guy.

The Shield came along several years later, debuting at the 2012 Survivor Series. This group would be made up entirely of NXT standouts the company had high hopes for. They were only together for a year and a half. Yet the potential of the group was realized when all three came to define the WWE landscape for years after in singles competition.

Roman Reigns, Seth Rollins, and Dean Ambrose would all become major stars and world champions in WWE, with Reigns and Rollins still on top there more than a decade later; while Ambrose went on to a bold new chapter in his career as the hardest-working man in AEW, Jon Moxley.

The multi-generational Evolution gang—Ric Flair, Randy Orton, and Batista—taunt their WrestleMania 20 opponents.

PHOTO BY AL BELLO

IN 2008, AFTER MORE THAN a decade of having its television shows rated TV-14, WWE decided to truly rein things in and go for the TV-PG rating with a milder, more family-friendly product. Thus, the period now known as the PG Era would begin.

This constituted a shift that, although was not as watered down as the New Generation Era of the 1990s, still marked a drastic change of pace—one that was less than popular with older fans, who had gotten used to the wild and woolly days of Attitude (and, to a lesser degree, Ruthless Aggression). Add to that WWE's switch to the widescreen, HD format in 2008, and the company's TV product looked different than ever before.

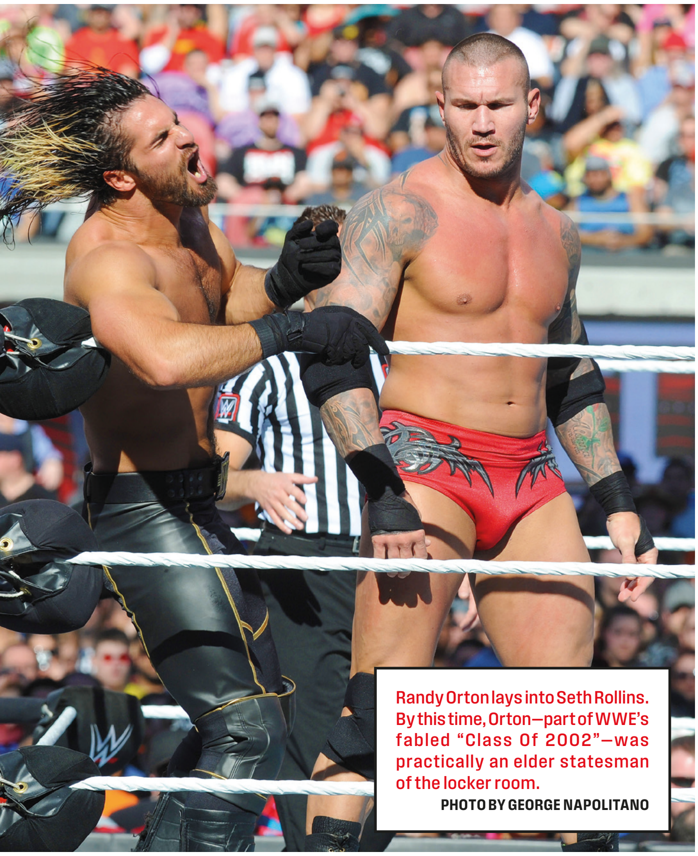
Granted, the change had been a long time coming. The shocking deaths of Eddie Guerrero and especially Chris Benoit had led to sea changes in the industry, and seemed to represent a symbolic end to the days when it felt like WWE could get away with anything. The PG Era meant no more blood. It meant no more foul language. It also meant that women had a chance to be seen as more than just eye candy.

WWE's marketing department had long been pushing for a PG product that would help the company promote once again to children and families. Those audiences had been the backbone of its customer base in the years before the Attitude Era. Plus, a more family-friendly product would not scare sponsors away.

In the late-2000s and much of the 2010s, that's what fans—and the grateful marketing department—finally got. This change benefited no one more than John Cena, who was a kinder, gentler type of WWE main-eventer. His positive message and earnest persona harkened back to the days of Hulkamania.

In the years to come, WWE would grapple with its identity and struggle to heat things up again. Somehow, it needed to regain the creative magic of when the company was riding high. There would be changes in tone designed to break free of the stagnancy, and, most importantly, to always be making new stars.

In the mid-2010s we saw the so-called Reality Era—a strange thing



Randy Orton lays into Seth Rollins. By this time, Orton—part of WWE's fabled "Class Of 2002"—was practically an elder statesman of the locker room.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

"Hangman" Adam Page clobbers CM Punk during their World title bout at AEW Double or Nothing 2022. Whether or not WWE brass will admit it, the rise of All Elite Wrestling put needed pressure on the industry leader to step up its game.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD

Rey Mysterio hits a bulldog on D-Von Dudley. Widely acclaimed as one of the all-time top luchadores, Mysterio stood out in an era that showcased increasingly athletic pro wrestling.

PHOTO BY GARY DINEEN

THE YES MOVEMENT

FOR MANY FANS, THE WWE during the 2010s was highlighted by the rise of Daniel Bryan (Bryan Danielson) as a major, bankable, main-event star. WWE had traditionally been known as the land of the giants. Although we saw others, like Rey Mysterio and Eddie Guerrero, who helped to break that stereotype, there was something extra special about the Yes Movement. It felt more organic; more dictated by the fans.

One of the most dramatic changes to occur in the WWE Era was the extent to which crowd input and social media interaction had an effect on WWE booking. While Vince McMahon and the rest of WWE creative eventually bent to outside influence and strapped the rocket to Bryan's back leading into WrestleMania 30, that was not originally the plan. Unlike Mysterio and Guerrero, who represented concerted, pre-meditated efforts on WWE's part to try to do something different, the Yes Movement legitimately hijacked WWE's creative and made it better.

Taking what was supposed to be Batista's spot following the 2014 Royal Rumble, Daniel Bryan embraced the fans ... and they embraced him. His on-screen war with The Authority became the most talked-about storyline in years. Bryan's victory for the championship at WrestleMania 30 was the icing on the cake. And, for the first time, it felt like a top WWE attraction had genuinely been chosen by the fans. It was a sign of things to come.

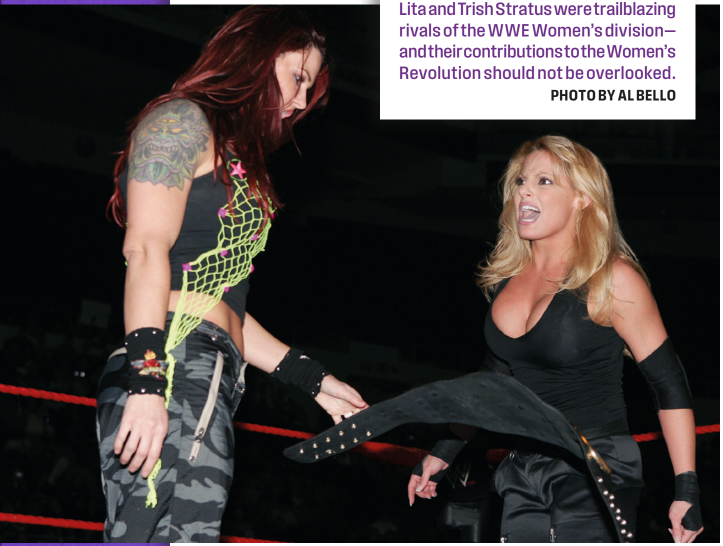
Daniel Bryan is ready for his big moment at WrestleMania 30.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Bryan helped pave the way for other fan-favorite underdogs such as Sami Zayn and Jey Uso.

PHOTOS BY EARL GARDNER

THE WOMEN'S REVOLUTION



Lita and Trish Stratus were trailblazing rivals of the WWE Women's division—and their contributions to the Women's Revolution should not be overlooked.
PHOTO BY AL BELLO

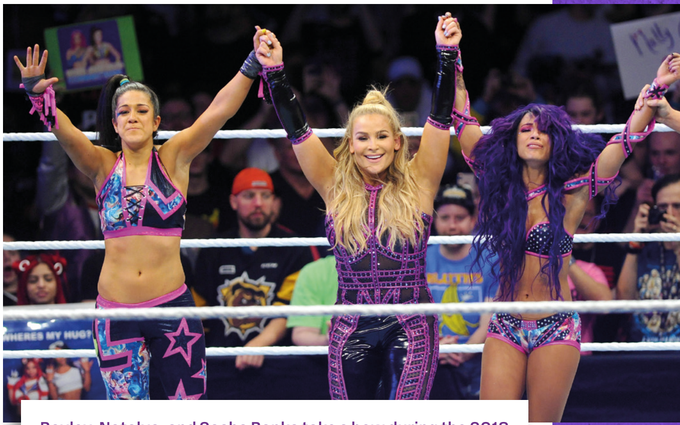
DON'T CALL THEM "DIVAS." At least, not anymore. One of the most encouraging and thrilling things to come down the pike in the past decade has been the rise of women's wrestling across the entire North American grappling landscape. And the leader of that industry has certainly undergone a dramatic change for the better.

That's not to take away from the impressive strides made by women even in the Divas era. Back in 2002, the likes of Trish Stratus and Lita were breaking out of the constraints put on them by the vestiges of the Attitude Era and doing special things, including *Raw's* first all-women main event in December 2004. The Bella Twins, Nikki and Brie, also represented a significant moment in how WWE presented women, leading to the *Total Divas* juggernaut TV franchise that wound up exposing a whole generation of casual viewers to the WWE product.

But the true Women's Revolution, as we know it today, began in NXT with the success of what would later be known as WWE's "Four Horsewomen": Becky Lynch, Sasha Banks, Charlotte Flair, and Bayley. Once that tide crashed on the main roster in 2015 and 2016, the dam broke, and the floodgates were open for a whole new kind of women's wrestling in WWE.

The division would be taken more seriously than ever. Gone were the days of bra-and-panties matches and catfights. The women began to steal the show on a regular basis. And, for a while there, "The Man" Becky Lynch was legitimately WWE's top star.

Although it was just a one-shot, the Evolution pay-per-view in 2018 went a huge way toward showcasing the women, as did the arrival of the Women's Royal Rumble, Women's Money in the Bank, Women's Elimination Chamber, and so on. Today, we see the amazing achievements of the likes of Bianca Belair, Rhea Ripley, Tiffany Stratton, and so many others, doing things that would've been unthinkable in any other WWE time period.



Bayley, Natalya, and Sasha Banks take a bow during the 2018 Evolution pay-per-view. PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Triple H makes an over-the-top entrance at WrestleMania 30. If those masked valets look familiar, it's because you're witnessing the first big-stage appearances of Sasha Banks, Alexa Bliss, and Charlotte Flair.
PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

to call anything involving pro wrestling—which seemed to be a backlash to the overwhelming dominance of Cena. That period saw fans organically get behind Daniel Bryan, as well as bear witness to the rise of The Shield and the subsequent successes of its individual members.

It was a time when the fan base, branded by WWE marketing wizards as the "WWE Universe," really started to make its opinions felt more strongly than ever before. On social media and in the arenas, wrestling enthusiasts seemed to feel an entitlement to be involved in the booking of the show—voicing their displeasure for established stars like Cena and Batista in the process.

The 2010s were the years when social media really took hold in all of our lives. And rather than shy away from this level of fan participation, WWE would lean into it, using the burgeoning medium to tremendous success in growing its brand more strongly than ever (we'll forgive that whole Tout misstep).

THE RISE OF NXT

BACK IN 2002, WWE RELIED on a network of outside, technically independent organizations then known as developmental territories, including Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW), Heartland Wrestling Association (HWA), and, later, Deep South Wrestling (DSW), to help groom and prepare future stars. The old territorial system had been destroyed by the WWF and a changing media landscape back in the 1980s, and it was getting harder to find places to bring in the stars of tomorrow.

Today, things couldn't be more different, thanks to WWE's protracted efforts to build an in-house developmental network of its own, including the establishment of NXT, as well as the company's very own Performance Center in Orlando, Florida. It started in 2007 as Florida Championship Wrestling, WWE's first fully owned developmental. And that morphed in 2012 into what is now known as the NXT brand.

Taking hold on the fledgling WWE Network in 2014, NXT became known not only as the ultimate proving ground for WWE talent, but one of the most exciting wrestling promotions in the business—developmental or not. The black-and-gold phenomenon that grew out of the 2010s even occasionally overshadowed the main roster. Although NXT has changed over the years, it remains WWE's most dependable source for new talent, and the place to look if you want to see who's going to be main-eventing WrestleMania five to 10 years from now.

Thanks to the NXT system, WWE was able to produce, practically from the ground up, such stars as: Roman Reigns, Bray Wyatt, Big E, Bron Breakker, Sasha Banks, Charlotte Flair, Bayley, Tiffany Stratton, Rhea Ripley, and Bianca Belair. And that's not even including standout independent and international wrestlers who used NXT as a springboard to bigger things, such as Seth Rollins, Shinsuke Nakamura, Finn Balor, Damian Priest, Gunther, Becky Lynch, Kevin Owens, Sami Zayn, and many more. It's hard to imagine what WWE might look like today without NXT.

Shinsuke Nakamura
PHOTO BY STU SAKS

Kevin Owens
PHOTO BY STU SAKS

THE PANDEMIC ERA

Drew McIntyre's moment in the sun was delayed (temporarily) by pandemic-era shutdowns. However, he would later emerge as a top star of the WWE roster.
PHOTO BY SCOTT LESH

IT COULD BE ARGUED that the success of The Bloodline, as well as many other dramatic changes in WWE, can be tied to something that was totally beyond the company's control—something that affected the entire country, and the world at large.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, leading to an extended period of lockdown that changed how people would live their lives. WWE had to adapt to this new reality, as did the entire wrestling industry. The crowds went away, leading to some of the most surreal moments in WWE history, including the eerily silent WrestleMania 36 held at the empty WWE Performance Center.

Some have said that this kneecapped the attempted coronation of Drew McIntyre as WWE's next big thing. But, conversely, it would have the opposite effect on Roman Reigns.

Perhaps the most memorable thing about the pandemic era in WWE was the establishment of the ThunderDome—a unique, yet no less surreal adaptation that replaced live crowds with video screens in which fans could be seen watching the show remotely from home. The videos came replete with phony crowd noise piped in for effect.

This certainly was no one's ideal, but it was a gimmick that at least attempted to keep things interesting during a trying time. It will always be remembered as an unprecedented period in WWE history. And the absence of live crowds made it that much sweeter when the fans finally started to trickle back over the next two years.

PHOTO BY AL BELLO

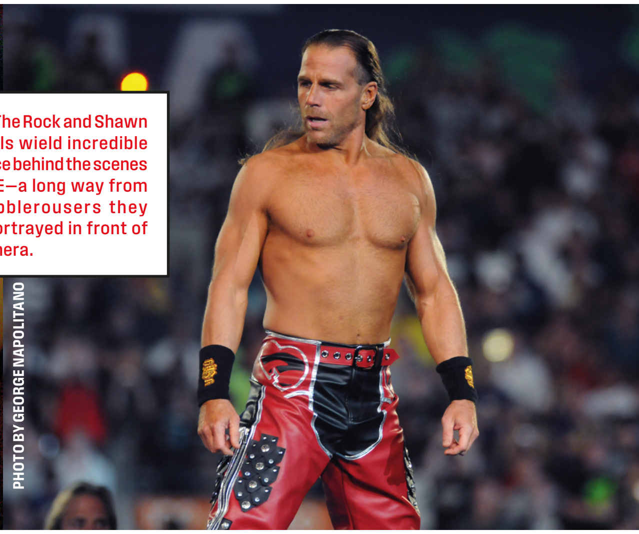


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Today, The Rock and Shawn Michaels wield incredible influence behind the scenes of WWE—a long way from the rabblerousers they once portrayed in front of the camera.

TODAY'S FANS LOVE TO keep track of these "eras," from "Attitude" to "Reality." What followed was a succession of them, which saw numerous shifts in WWE's promotional and booking strategies. Admittedly, we may need some distance from these transitional periods before we can fully define them.

In some ways, the current renaissance of WWE—and some have termed it exactly that, the Renaissance Era—was partly set in motion by the first true rival to the company's top position in quite some time. In 2019, All Elite Wrestling took shape and meaningfully changed the balance of power in the wrestling industry.

For the first time since the Monday Night War, someone was truly knocking at the door of WWE. And, as we've seen in the past, this kind of palpable competition can lead to innovation. The early successes of AEW provided the ultimate wake-up call to a company that was badly in need of one after years of relative complacency.

The result is what we see today, as WWE in the 2020s has been on fire to a degree that we've never seen before. True, the WWF of the mid-1980s and late-1990s arguably enjoyed even more mainstream prominence than the WWE of today. But it's such a different, fractured media landscape today that such things are difficult to measure. From a business standpoint, the company has never been hotter or more profitable, raking in billions and setting financial records left and right.

Two years ago, we witnessed something we never thought we'd see ... at least not in Vince McMahon's lifetime. Threatened by a permanent ousting from his own company due to allegations of gross sexual misconduct and misappropriation of funds, McMahon engineered the sale of WWE to Endeavor Group Holdings. The sports media powerhouse merged WWE with UFC to form TKO Group.

THE DOWNFALL OF VINCE McMAHON

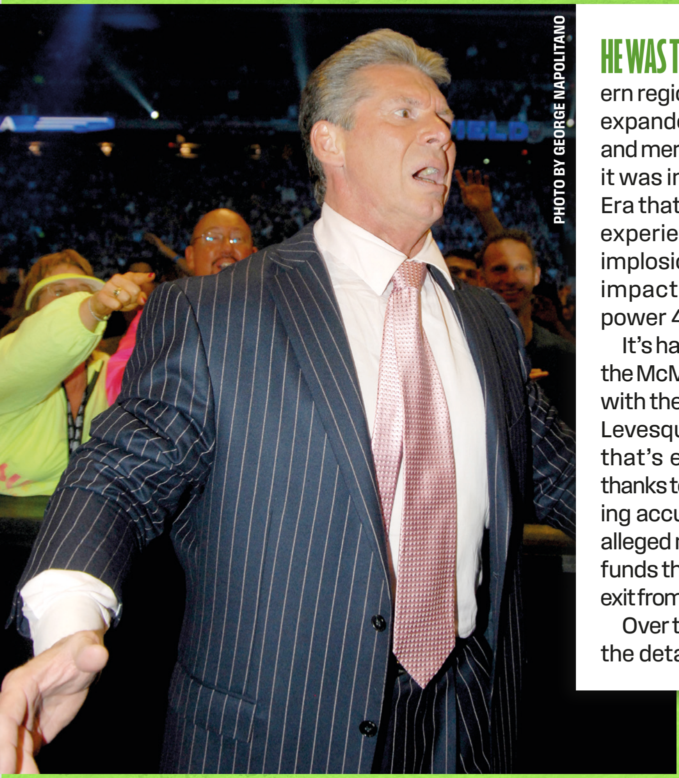


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

HE WAS THE MAN WHO took a Northeastern regional wrestling enterprise and expanded it into a global multimedia and merchandising phenomenon. But it was in the later years of the WWE Era that Vincent Kennedy McMahon experienced a catastrophic public implosion every bit as dramatic and impactful as his meteoric rise to power 40 years prior.

It's hard to imagine a WWE without the McMahon Family at the helm. But, with the exception of son-in-law Paul Levesque as Chief Content Officer, that's exactly what we now have, thanks to the last-straw scandal involving accusations of sexual abuse and alleged misappropriation of company funds that led to McMahon's decisive exit from the company he spearheaded.

Over the course of the early-2020s, the details that came to light—many of them odious beyond mention—involving former WWE paralegal Janel Grant and others, painted a picture of a man who seemed to believe, following decades of escaping one scandal after another, that he was beyond consequences. His initial false retirement, followed by his forced return to the company and the subsequent fast-tracked sale to Endeavor, made front page news, as did the inevitable squeeze-out that finally saw him on the outside looking in.

In 2025, the man who was once the very embodiment of WWE finds himself embroiled in a legal nightmare at age 80—a nightmare that's seemingly of his own making. And today's fans witness the once-unthinkable: a WWE that's moved on to even greater heights without Vincent Kennedy McMahon.

THE BLOODLINE SAGA

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

MORE THAN ANY STORYLINE of the WWE Era, it was the captivating tale of The Bloodline that most captured the imagination of the fans—at the same time, setting the business on fire more than anything that's happened since The Attitude Era (sorry, John Cena). It also finally christened Roman Reigns as the company's top guy, something years of clumsy and forced booking as a fan favorite had failed to do prior.

Many have gone so far as to call it the greatest storyline in WWE history. Sure, it's still going on today. But it was really during that epic four-year title reign of Roman—from 2020 until Cody Rhodes became "the man" in 2024—that The Bloodline Saga took over WWE and dominated television, with fans eating up each and every nuanced twist and turn.

The Bloodline can be pointed to as a direct catalyst for WWE's new boom period. And it set a new standard for storytelling in professional wrestling.

A CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR MOMENTS

8/30/20: Roman Reigns wins the Universal title at Payback.

10/25/20: Reigns makes Jey Uso acknowledge him at Hell in a Cell.

4/4/22: Reigns defeats Brock Lesnar at WrestleMania, unifying the Universal and WWE titles.

9/3/22: Solo Sikoa makes his surprise main-roster debut.

9/23/22: Sami Zayn is officially made an "Honorary Uce."

10/28/22: Zayn's "Ucey" promo breaks the fourth wall.

2/19/23: Reigns takes on Sami at Elimination Chamber in Montreal.

4/1/23: Zayn & Kevin Owens win tag team gold from The Usos at WrestleMania 39.

5/27/23: Jimmy Uso turns on "The Tribal Chief."

4/8/24: Cody Rhodes finishes the story, dethroning Reigns.

Roman Reigns battles Baron Corbin during a tough point in his career. Fortunately, things were about to turn around for Reigns in a major, industry-shaking way.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

After nearly three-quarters of a century of being largely family-owned, WWE had finally fallen under a giant corporate umbrella—the eventual fate of so much intellectual property and so many American media entities in recent decades. It feels like the ultimate culmination of the WWE Era. The McMahon family legacy, as we have known it, is at an end. And the company, as it exists today, is vastly different from what it was in 2002.

IT'S BEEN SAID SO MANY times over the years that it's almost lost meaning, but today's WWE is really and truly in a whole new era. The company's flagship program, *Monday Night Raw*, now streams on Netflix. Gigantic stadium shows are a regular occurrence throughout the year. Non-televised live events have been largely eclipsed, and the company is more than ever a dedicated producer of televised entertainment.

The departure of Kevin Dunn, long the guiding force behind WWE TV, has led to a stylish new look and approach to how shows are staged, shot, and edited. The dead horse of kayfabe, abandoned decades ago, has been thoroughly beaten into non-existence. Attitude Era stars including Triple H, The Rock, and Shawn Michaels literally run the show as elder statesmen of the industry. And the name of Vince McMahon is rightfully nowhere to be heard.

Perhaps more than anything, the strong, vocal rejection of Hulk Hogan by fans at the Netflix debut of *Raw* in January typifies the drastic changes. The man who once revolutionized the WWF of an earlier boom period, and who had experienced a dramatic renaissance with fans at the start of the WWE Era, was now being roundly booed out of the building by a new generation of fans who viewed him as a hopelessly dated relic—one whose personal views and public image could not have been more out of step.

It was a sign of the times. In a business that's constantly in flux and reinventing itself, the old rules simply no longer apply. This is a whole new WWE, brother.

As the company continues its growth, the likes of Tiffany Stratton are expected to lead the next generation of WWE superstars.
PHOTO BY JORDAN WILLIAMS

TRAGEDY & LOSS

ANY RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WWE Era would be incomplete without a remembrance of its three greatest tragedies: the untimely deaths of Eddie Guerrero and Bray Wyatt, as well as the horrific and unthinkable Benoit murder-suicide. Each of these events has left a hole in the hearts of WWE fans that will never heal.

Eddie Guerrero was one of the most beloved WWE superstars of the early-2000s. He seemed to have beaten his demons and made the most of a second chance with the company. But the wrestling world was shocked on November 13, 2005, when he was found dead in his hotel room. The outpouring of love, especially during the tribute shows that followed, represented a rare moment when wrestling's curtain of illusion was pulled back … and his peers were allowed to be real.

On August 24, 2023, when Windham Rotunda (Bray Wyatt) passed away in his sleep at home, fans got a rueful reminder of what it's like to lose a beloved figure so unexpectedly. Few performers galvanized fans the way Wyatt did, and his creativity and uniqueness were credits to the industry. Like Guerrero, he left us with so much potential yet to be fulfilled.

But there is nothing more shocking and sad in all of WWE history than what happened at the end of June 2007, when Chris Benoit, once among the most lauded professional wrestlers who ever lived, murdered his defenseless son Daniel and wife Nancy, then took his own life at the family's home in Fayetteville, Georgia. To this day, fans, friends, and colleagues have struggled to make sense of this abominable turn of events, which forever destroyed the legacy of Benoit and led to his erasure from WWE's official history.

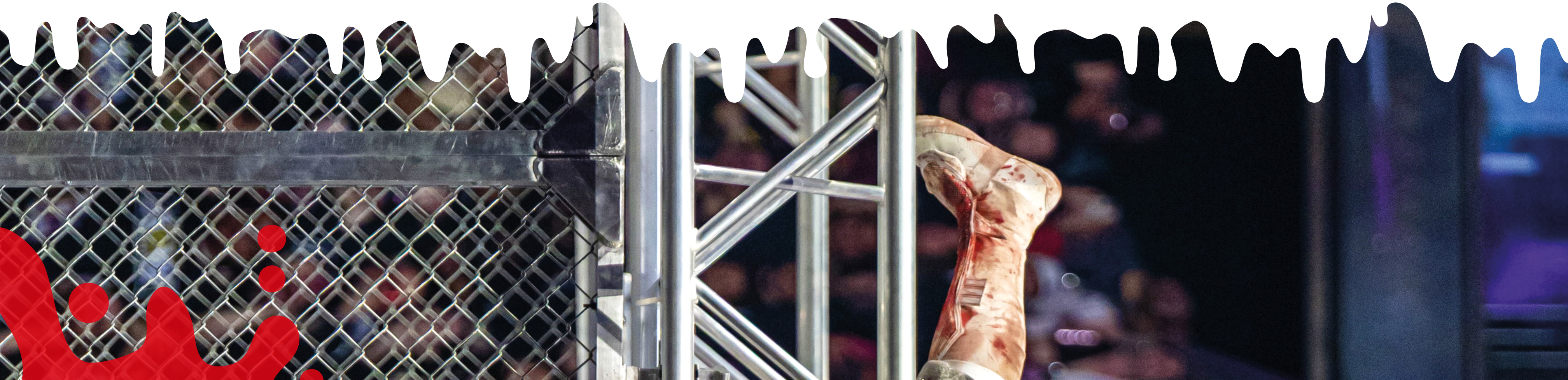
Whatever solace can be taken from the Benoit tragedy comes from the fact that, along with Guerrero's death, it led to greater awareness of the dangers of steroid and drug abuse in WWE, as well as the effects of CTE, finally leading to real change in the years to come.

Bray Wyatt
PHOTO BY STU SAKS

Eddie Guerrero
PHOTO BY GARY DINEEN

BLOODY

REVOLUTION



AEW'S HEROES GET THEIR POUND OF FLESH

IN THE LAND OF ALL ELITE, GANGS OF RULEBREAKING VILLAINS OFTEN RUN ROUGHSHOD. COULD ONE NIGHT OF FEEL-GOOD VICTORIES SIGNAL A CHANGING OF THE GUARD?

TEXT BY KEVIN McELVANEY
PHOTOS BY DOMINIQUE DINH

Will Ospreay uses a Spanish Fly to drop Kyle Fletcher from the top of the cage to the mat below.

TWO YEARS AGO THIS month, *PWI* Contributing Writer Scott Fishman expounded on a pressing issue within All Elite Wrestling—namely, that the promotion's rulebreakers had become too numerous and powerful ("AEW's Good Guys Have A Bad-Guy Problem," June 2023). Given the myriad ruthless, villainous stables and a lack of strong, heroic types to take them on, Fishman argued, episodes of *Dynamite* and *Rampage* (R.I.P.) had descended into chaos.

By early-2025, the problem had gotten even worse. With the likes of the Death Riders, The Hurt Syndicate, and The Don Callis Family claiming most of the company's championships, episodes of *Dynamite* and *Collision* became veritable playgrounds for antagonistic, lawless grapplers. And, frankly, too much of that sort of thing can make any wrestling show painful to watch.

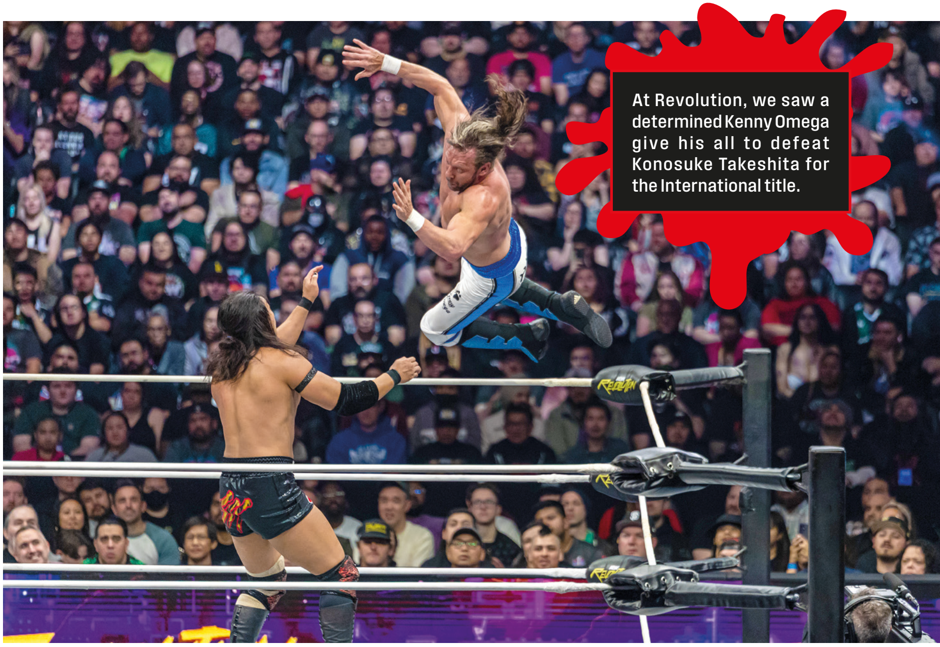
In this regard, Revolution 2025 may have represented a new beginning. Although AEW pay-per-views generally garner solid reviews from fans, this card was particularly loaded with mouthwatering matchups that delivered both action and storytelling. And unlike many recent episodes of AEW TV, Revolution saw strong showings from the company's resident fan favorites. Not only did the heroes emerge victorious, but they did so without having the wind immediately knocked from their sails by factions of roving baddies.

DON CALLIS, DENIED

Outside of perhaps the Death Riders, who twice suffocated poor Bryan Danielson with a plastic bag, there is no more an opportunistic group within the AEW ranks than the one headed up by the conniving Don Callis.

With the scheming manager and color commentator in their corner, Konosuke Takeshita and Kyle Fletcher have found themselves with far greater shares of the spotlight than they knew without him. At Revolution, though, these two leading members of Callis' talent stable were each served up a piping hot slice of humble pie.

First, came Takeshita, who, along with Callis, recently spoke to *PWI's* Al Castle about his plans for global wrestling domination ("The International Alpha," May 2025). Dubbed "The Alpha" by his charge, New Japan's NEVER openweight champion entered Revolu-



At Revolution, we saw a determined Kenny Omega give his all to defeat Konosuke Takeshita for the International title.

Adam Page flattens MJF with his trusty lariat. Despite Page's transgressions against Swerve Strickland and others, "Hangman" remains a key fan favorite in All Elite Wrestling.

tion as AEW's reigning International champion. And he was met there by a former Don Callis protege in Kenny Omega.

The two had not collided in a singles match since last September's All Out, where Takeshita had defeated Omega. For the better part of a half-hour, they waged war in this barnburner of a rematch. Crucially, neither man was able to connect with his finishing maneuver, due to a combination of fatigue and cunning strategy on the part of each competitor. Following a series of pinning combinations and reversals, Omega scored the deciding 1-2-3 on Takeshita, taking home the International title belt in the process.

That match was followed by another lengthy encounter featuring current and former members of The Don Callis Family. Having exhausted all other options to settle their boiling feud, Will Ospreay and Kyle Fletcher went at it inside a steel cage.

Ospreay and Fletcher, each with seething hatred in their eyes, used the sharp edges of the cage structure to bruise and maim one another. Buckets of blood were spilled during a fight that saw the interference of Mark Davis (siding with longtime tag partner Fletcher) and the copious use of outside weapons.

In what will surely be remembered as the height of the match, Ospreay and Fletcher sat atop the steel cage engaged in battle. Having stabbed his foe in the head with Don Callis' trusty screwdriver, Ospreay grabbed hold of Fletcher and executed a death-defying Spanish Fly from the top of the cage to the mat below. He would finally put away his rival with the Tiger Driver '91—a move he'd sworn off using, but which Fletcher had previously employed against him.

Accustomed to his "Family" winning most of its matches, Callis walked away 0-2 at Revolution. Tough luck, Don!

BELT GOES BINTED

SIMPLY TIMELESS

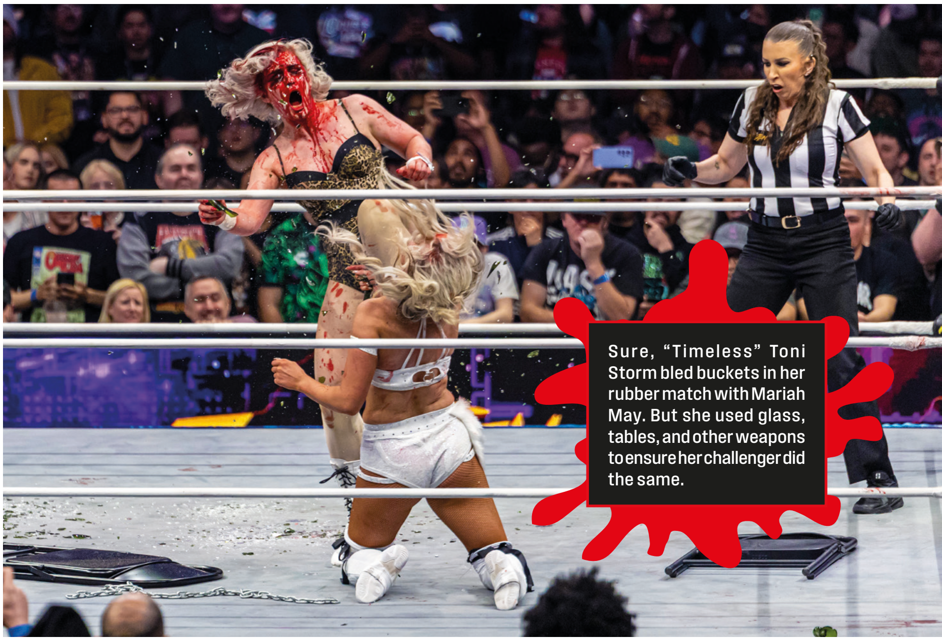
The all-out war between Ospreay and Fletcher wasn't the only bloodbath of the evening. In some ways, the falls count anywhere match between Women's World champ "Timeless" Toni Storm and "The Glamour" Mariah May was far more gruesome than the steel cage match that followed it. Dubbed the "Hollywood Ending," the third bout in the series between Storm and May would decide the winner of one of the most brutal wrestling feuds of the last two years.

May, who began the rivalry last summer by attacking Storm, beat her for the AEW Women's title at Wembley

Stadium. That championship bout at All In was followed by a period of radio silence from Storm—outside of a few matches for Mexico's CMLL—and then an apparent return to her pre-"Timeless" persona. Later, Storm dropped the act and challenged May to a rematch. The two squared off at Grand Slam Australia, where the Queensland native captured the Women's World title for a fourth time.

Thus, the stakes were high at Revolution. The two women took the match's stipulation to heart by battling all over the arena. Tables were smashed, blood was spilled ... and, in a completely shocking display, Storm and May engaged in an impromptu Taipei Death Match, with each woman wielding a taped fist covered in glass from a shattered champagne bottle.

To the delight of fans, Storm brought out the same high-heeled shoe that May had bloodied her with eight months earlier. She used it to bludgeon the challenger before piledriving her through a table to collect the pinfall.



Sure, "Timeless" Toni Storm bled buckets in her rubber match with Mariah May. But she used glass, tables, and other weapons to ensure her challenger did the same.

HANGMAN'S HOME

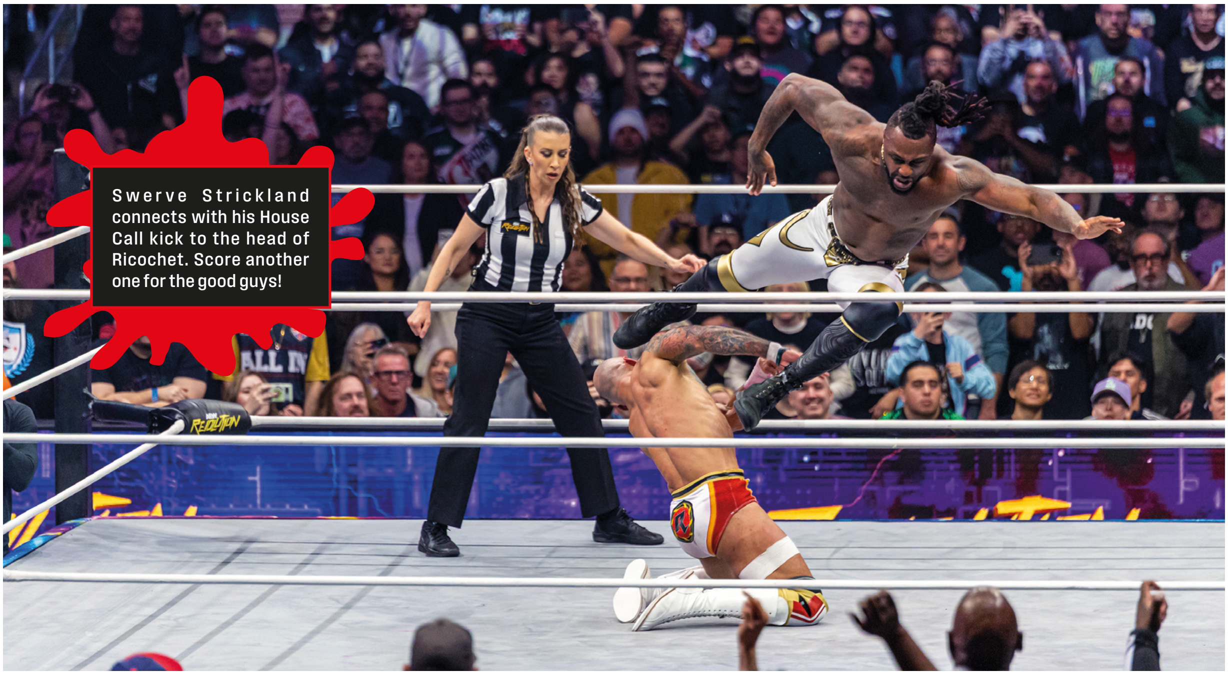
For all the many criticisms levied against wrestling fans, no one can say they aren't a forgiving lot. Consider the case of "Hangman" Adam Page, who, just a few months prior, had set fire to Swerve Strickland's childhood home. It was one of the single most loathsome acts in the five-year history of All Elite Wrestling. And yet, after a shockingly brief time period, AEW fans were more than ready to cheer his every move.

What changed? Well, some "credit" must be given to Maxwell Jacob Friedman. After merely being at odds again with MJF, Page became a fan favorite almost by default—something an exhausted Friedman bemoaned during their match at Revolution.

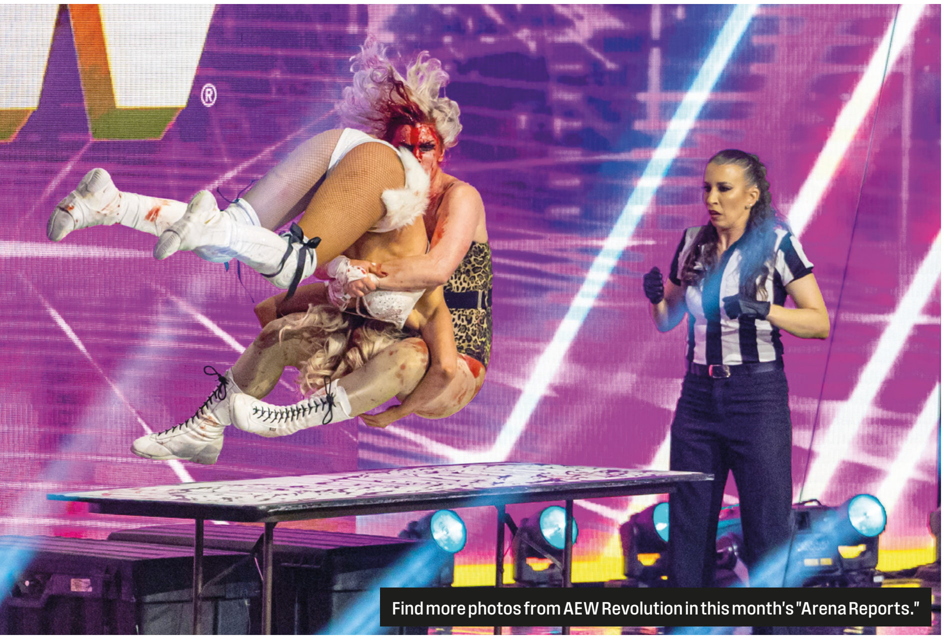
To be sure, there's more to "Hangman's" heroic homecoming than his juxtaposition with the company's most detestable attraction. From the get-go, Page has enjoyed a special relationship with the AEW faithful, who shared a resolute belief that he would become the promotion's first homegrown star.

Despite finding some success in Ring of Honor and New Japan, it was in AEW where the former "Elite" member truly broke out on his own. With his victory over Kenny Omega at Full Gear 2021, Page began a six-month reign as World champion that can never be erased from the history books. At Revolution 2025, he penned another meaningful entry by trouncing MJF.

After smashing his opponent's face with a brutal Angel's Wings—a tribute



Swerve Strickland connects with his House Call kick to the head of Ricochet. Score another one for the good guys!



Find more photos from AEW Revolution in this month's "Arena Reports."

to his recently retired friend, Christopher Daniels—Page followed up with a Buckshot Lariat for the three-count. Given the nature of the win, which opened the main card of Revolution, it only makes sense that "Hangman" Page will knock some sense into the Jon Moxleys and Don Callises of the world in the months ahead.

SWERVE'S HOUSE

Having been bloodied and embarrassed by the increasingly obnoxious Ricochet, Swerve Strickland entered the number-one contendership match at Revolution with vengeance on his mind. Strickland and manager Prince Nana wanted to reclaim their stolen Embassy robe and dish out a humiliating loss to Ricochet en route to a guaranteed shot at the AEW World title.

For most of the 18-minute match, it seemed either competitor might come out on top. Each man evaded or kicked out of the other's most devastating signature attacks. For a time, the tension between Strickland and Nana was palpable. Would one fully turn on the other, perhaps costing Strickland the bout?

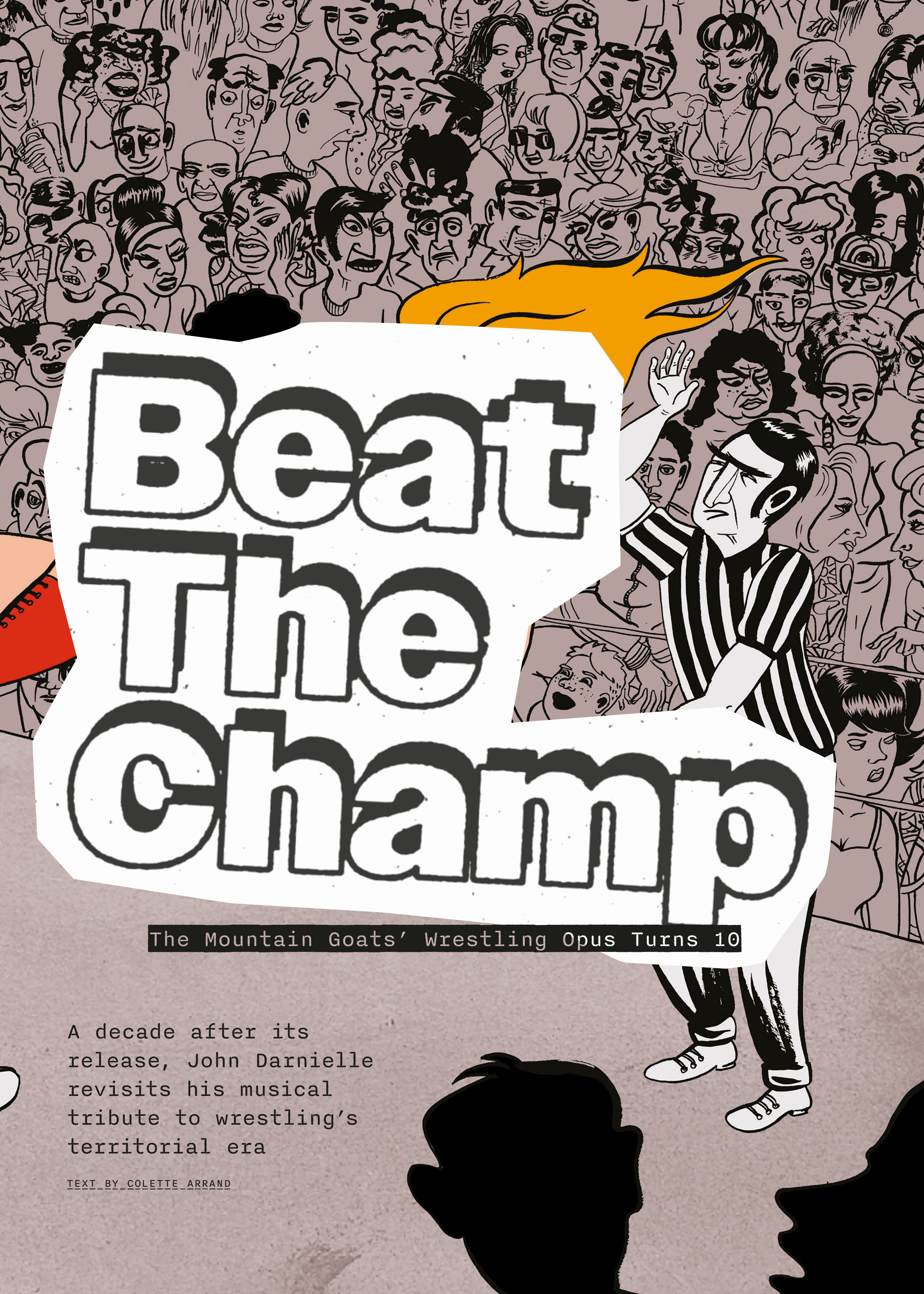
Ultimately, it took several of the former World champion's best shots—mainly, two iterations of the House Call sidekick, plus the Big Pressure slam—to put Ricochet down for the count. But that wasn't the end of the night for the new #1 contender. Indeed, Strickland had one last surprise in store for the fans in attendance at Los Angeles' Crypto.com Arena.

When Jon Moxley retained the AEW World title over Adam Copeland and Christian Cage (who had inserted himself into the match near its conclusion), he was confronted outside an exit ramp by Prince Nana. Then, with the titleholder distracted, Strickland dove from the guardrail above, dropping Mox with a double-stomp.

Of course, by attacking Moxley, Strickland was practically inviting a future beatdown at the hands of Mox's cohorts in the Death Riders. Yet, his fearless stunt at Revolution represented a heroic willingness to go toe-to-toe—or, as it happened, toe-to-face—with the most despicable elements on the AEW roster.

So, bravo Swerve, Kenny Omega, Toni Storm ... and, yes, "Hangman" Page. Even as many of your peers remain content to take shortcuts, participate in blindside attacks, and gang up on their opponents, you have shown that there is a better way. With the support of pro wrestling fans, may you enjoy much success this year!

The number one contender to the AEW World title makes a surprise appearance at the end of the show to send fans home happy.



Beat The Champ

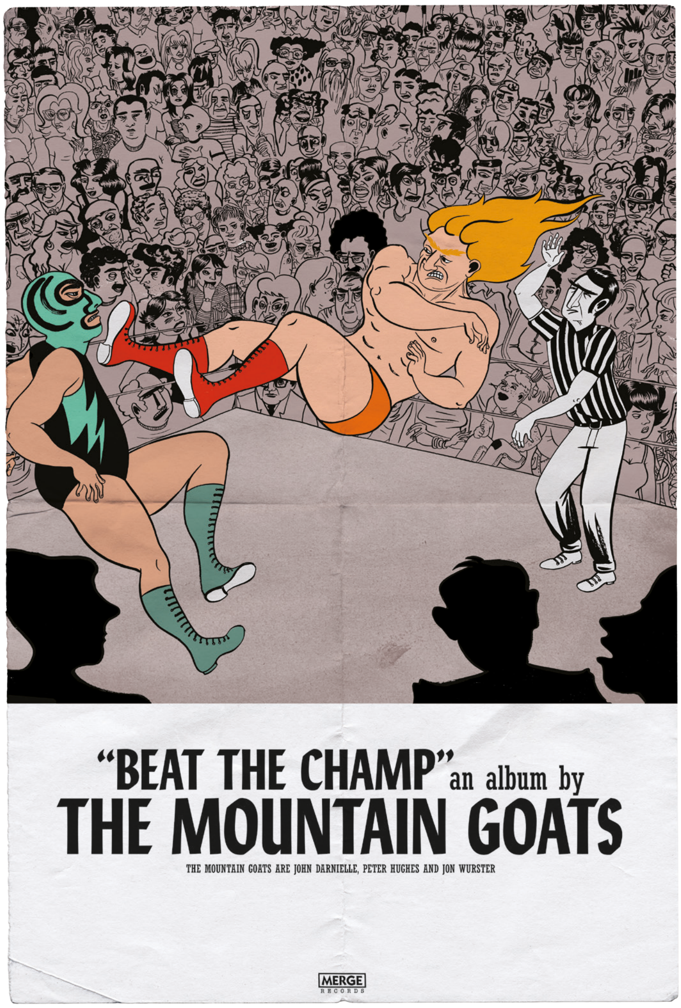
The Mountain Goats' Wrestling Opus Turns 10

A decade after its release, John Darnielle revisits his musical tribute to wrestling's territorial era

TEXT BY COLETTE ARRAND

Wrestler
THE UNFORGIVABLE SAVAGERY OF SUPERSTAR GRAHAM
RIC FLAIR: "NOBODY TAKES MY TITLE AND LIVES!"
Nick Bockwinkle vs. Terry Funk:
"The present crop of challengers is phenomenal. Steve Keirn, Mike Graham, Jack Brisco—they're all capable of dethroning Race."
THE MOUNTAIN GOATS BEAT THE CHAMP
ME

COURTESY OF MERGE RECORDS


“BEAT THE CHAMP” an album by
THE MOUNTAIN GOATS
THE MOUNTAIN GOATS ARE JOHN DARNIELLE, PETER HUGHES AND JON WURSTER
MERGE RECORDS

Promo poster for the Mountain Goats’ *Beat the Champ* (Merge Records, 2015)

“THIS RIGHT HERE IS AN album about professional wrestling,” John Darnielle declares in the opening sentence of the liner notes of *Beat the Champ*, the 2015 album by his band, the Mountain Goats. It is loudly, proudly so: 13 songs that are ferocious in their love for wrestling, wrestlers, and wrestling fans, approaching the subject from angles as intimate as a pencil jabbed into an eye and as remote as reading about the matches in Ontario in a magazine swiped off the rack of a Los Angeles drugstore.

In an era where fans were beginning to reach for theorists and podcasters to explain why they were drawn to wrestling, *Beat the Champ* drank deep from its well—enthralled by its heroes, piteous of its villains, and acutely aware of the humanity underpinning the whole enterprise.

More than a love letter to the sport, *Beat the Champ* is a legendarium, its songs preserving characters, territories, trends, and means of consuming wrestling that’ve otherwise been lost to time and ill-curation. Unless you’ve read the magazines of the era or seen the scant footage that’s survived the Los Angeles territory wrestling Darnielle grew up watching, “The Legend Of Chavo Guerrero” is the most complete record of his hero’s run as the territory’s top babyface. Filling out a landscape of top draws and notable figures like Bruiser Brody, Luna Vachon, and The Sheik are VHS artifacts including Apache Bull Ramos and Al Madril. These gladiators and figures drawn from Darnielle’s life and obsessions do battle in steel cages, risk their hair and masks, set fire to their enemies, turn their backs on their fans, and, when there is no camera to preen in front of, live as desperately as the people who pay their hard-earned money to watch them bleed.

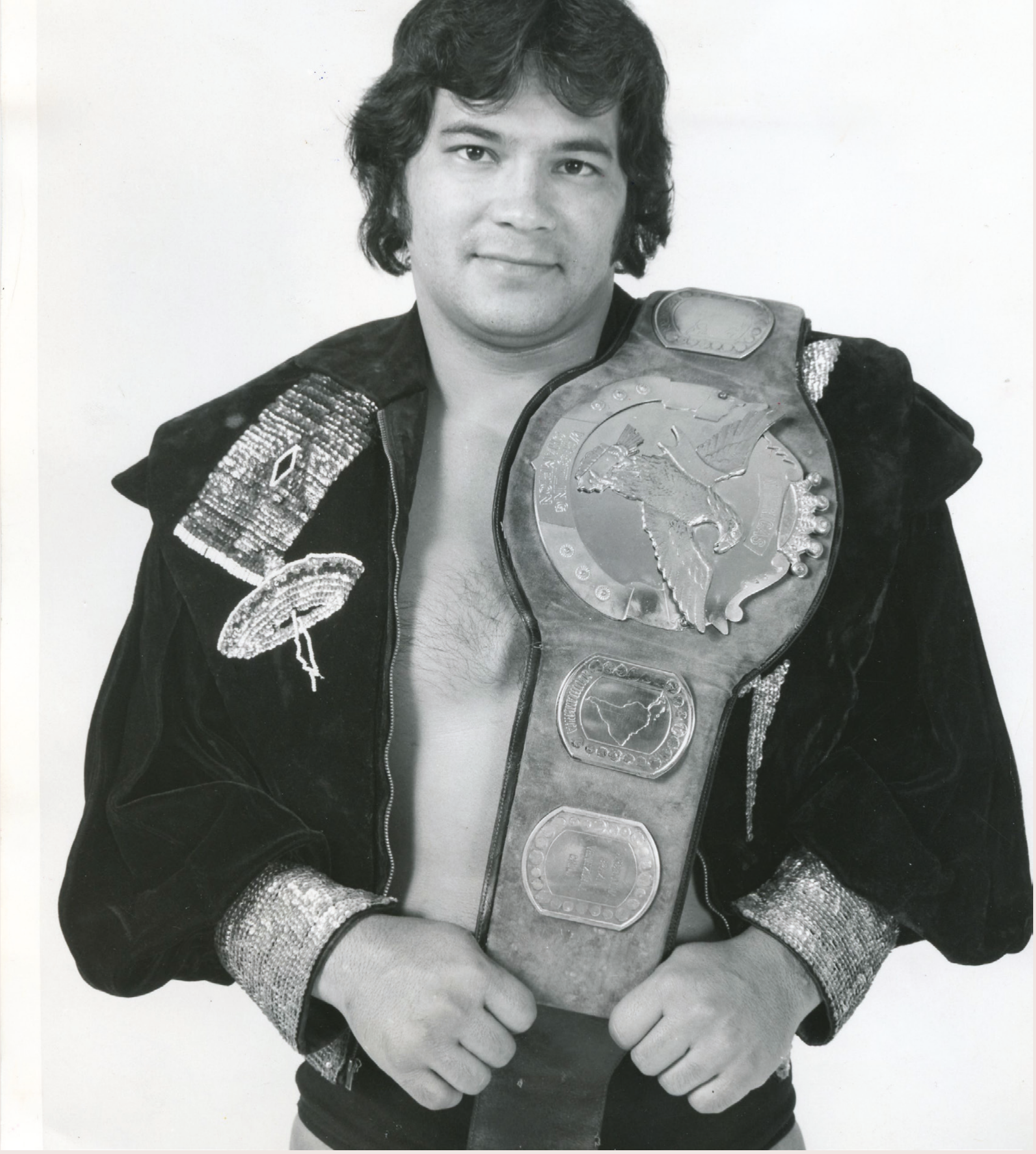
To celebrate the 10th anniversary of *Beat the Champ*, *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* spoke with Darnielle about the wrestlers who influenced the album, how the singer-songwriter engaged with wrestling as a child, and meeting his hero in the wake of the album’s success.

Arrand: We should start with Chavo Guerrero, who is a central figure on this album and to your conception of wrestling as a whole. What was it like growing up in the Southern California wrestling scene?

Darnielle: He was a guy I watched wrestle at the Olympic when I was 10 or 11, and he was legitimately my favorite wrestler. He’s incredibly underrated because footage of that era largely doesn’t exist. When the TV station that aired it, Channel 56, KDOC, changed owners, all of the wrestling videotapes were literally thrown in the dumpster, so most of the documentation of that era in English no longer exists. There’s stuff from Channel 34, KMEX, that you can find, but Chavo’s high point in the Southern California scene is mostly memory. Back then, wrestling cost nothing to see—it was maybe $5 a ticket, true working class entertainment. The heat Chavo could draw in that building was wild. He and the Guerrero family were royalty in Southern California, and because of how the territories worked, they felt like they were ours, a local phenomenon. That’s a powerful energy, watching it on Wednesday nights or at the arena. The Guerreros were brothers, they were a family. They were part of the immigrant story and represented family values and hard work. The thing about Chavo was that he stood for good—there’s no way he’d turn heel, and I don’t think he ever did, though he did grow a mustache at one point, which sort of counts.

Arrand: You have, I think, one of the better stories about meeting a childhood hero like that, which you did after the release of the song “The Legend Of Chavo Guerrero.” A full circle moment.

Darnielle: The whole process was so great because we didn’t holler at him to make a video. We released the song, and, on release day, people started tagging him on Twitter about it. He started responding, saying “literally everybody has been calling me all day, have you heard this song?” Flipping about it, as he was getting more heat than he had in a long time. I sent him a DM and said “I hope this hasn’t been unwelcome, I’ve always loved your stuff,” and he was stoked, so we worked it out ourselves to



Chavo Guerrero Sr. poses with the NWA Americas championship belt. John Darnielle cites the late grappler as his all-time favorite—and pays tribute to him with the track "The Legend Of Chavo Guerrero."
PHOTO BY THEO EHRET

do a video. I met him at the hotel I was staying at the morning of the shoot, and he was just an incredibly gracious and kind dude. He showed me how to do the moves, how to actually work them so that you're creating the sense of effort without actually straining.

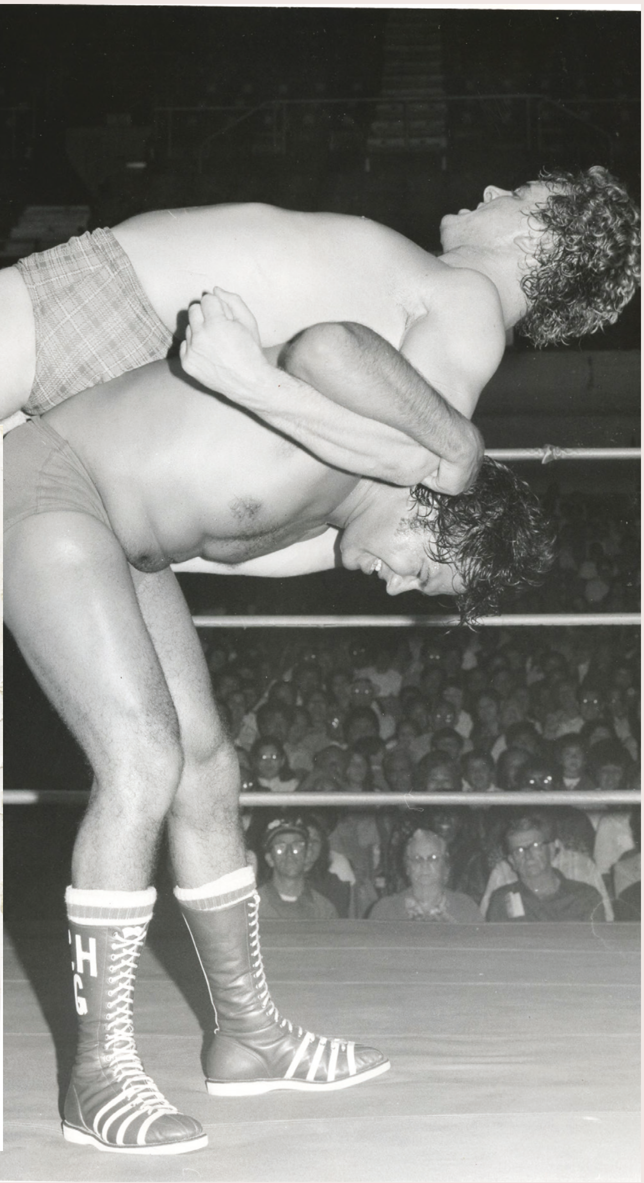
During the shoot, he announced to us that he was going to do the moonsault, his finishing move … which was not in the script, but it's his finish. The video ends with the VHS tape fading to static mid-moonsault because the wrestler he was saving me from didn't know what to do, so he walked forward, completely bailed on catching a 60-year-old Chavo Guerrero, who crashed shoulder-first into the mat. Later on, he told me that he was really hurt. But, in the moment, he said, "I've taken bumps before, get me some ice," and then we went to dinner. We stayed in touch until he died. It was a profound experience for me, to make contact with somebody who was such a source of inspiration for me … because he really was.

Arrand: How does someone like Apache Bull Ramos end up with a song on *Beat the Champ*?

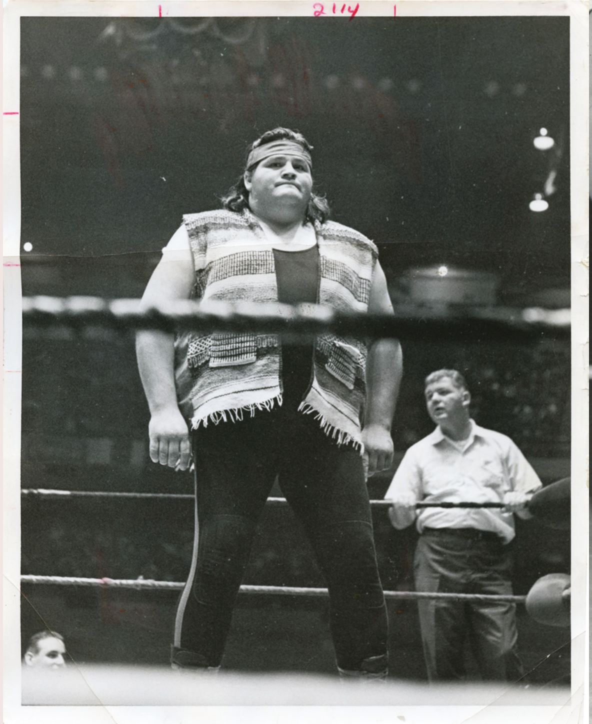
Darnielle: He's one of the guys I knew. An incredible heel. He would come on the mic and say "Listen all you Mexicans," and, like, his last name was Ramos, so he was just a brutal troll, the sort of thing you can't get away with now. It's good that the world has grown, but back then you didn't want the audience to play along—you wanted them to be in a state of fury and anger, and he knew how to get them there. Real theater. And the result was something cathartic, because you felt real malice towards these men. In writing *Beat the Champ*, I started with the guys I saw, and Bull Ramos drew a lot of heat in California. There's a believable quality to the heels of that era, like when someone like Greg Valentine wears a shirt that says "I broke Wahoo's leg," you see a picture of him in a wrestling magazine and buy into the idea that he's literally only in it to break people's legs.

I like horror movies—a guy who wants to break people's legs is not a good guy. Bull Ramos had that energy, and he was the master of the Indian Bullrope

Guerrero, regional superhero, hooks Roddy Piper into the Gory Special.
PHOTO BY THEO EHRET



Apache Bull Ramos was best known for antagonizing opponents inside the ring. Behind closed doors, that couldn't have been further from the truth.
PHOTO BY STANLEY WESTON

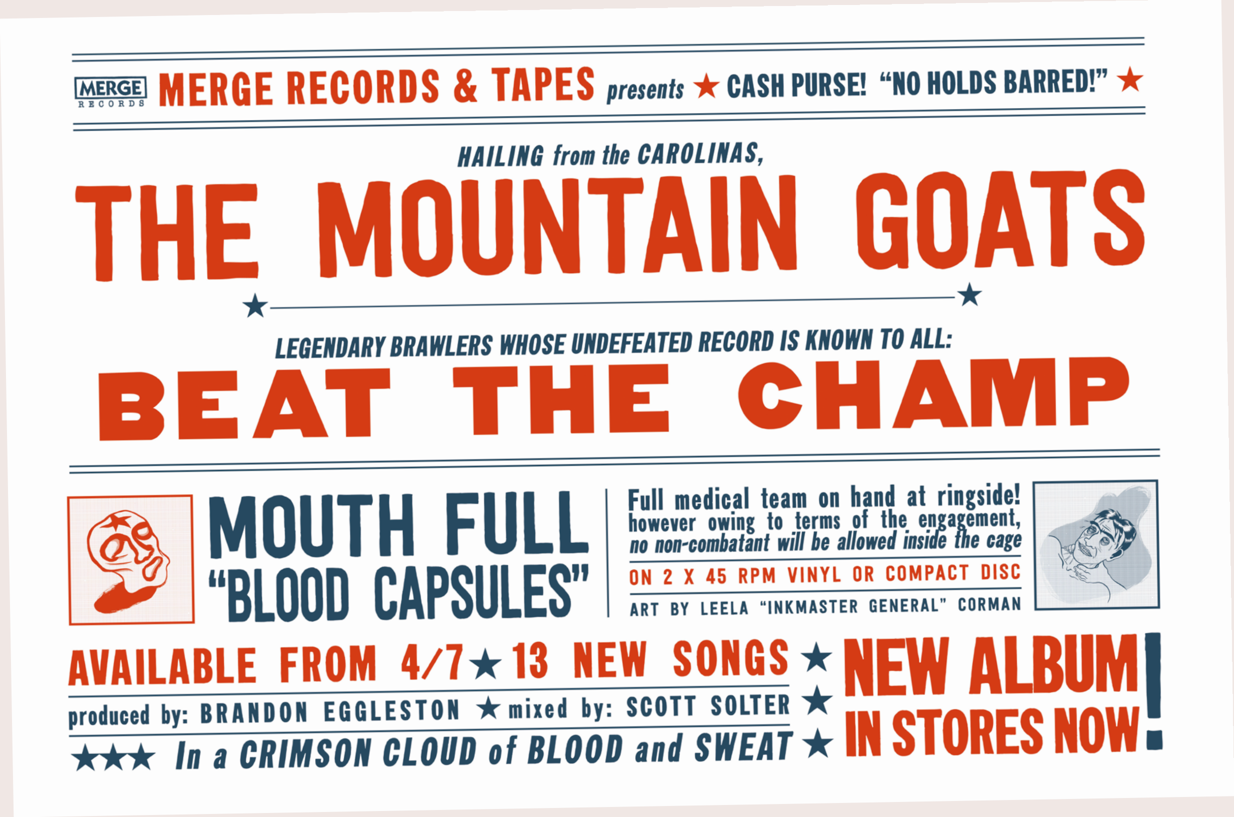


match. Which, of course he did, his full name was Apache Bull Ramos. Whether or not he was an Apache is immaterial, but that was his deal, and I caught him at the tail end of his run in California. But I remembered him and read his story and found out that he was, contrary to his persona, a really nice guy. That's something Chavo told me about the era, was how the heels were the sweetest guys outside of the ring, and "The Ballad Of Bull Ramos" was one of his favorite songs on the album. Him telling me that I got Apache Bull Ramos right is something I'll take to my grave.

Arrand: "Fire Editorial," which is a favorite of mine as someone whose parents grew up watching The Sheik in Detroit, digs into a different element of the wrestling fan experience, specifically the way in which magazines (like this one) could fascinate the mind in moralizing about, as you sing, our "tawdry dreams all come to life." I'd love to hear more about that experience, as it's a headspace that informs much of Beat the Champ.

Darnielle: Yes, The Sheik—"he's a disgrace to the sport. A disgrace!" And the magazines were the only way I had of knowing this. I think about this a lot because we're now in our 30th year of the Information Age, right? And it hasn't been good. We know that when there's more information out there, that just means there's more information that can be manipulated, so the notion of there being too much information is very real. There's only so much you can process—when there's a surfeit of information, it becomes useless at some point. If I give you a math equation but I say you have to use all of these numbers, you can't do the equation because there's too many numbers, right? I think in an environment where there's less information, you don't have to do more work, you *get* to do more work.

Your engagement with wrestling could go pretty deep when you had to put the pieces together yourself, especially out on the West Coast, when all of the wrestling magazines were covering the East Coast. There was this whole world, right? And you never saw those guys. But if they came to



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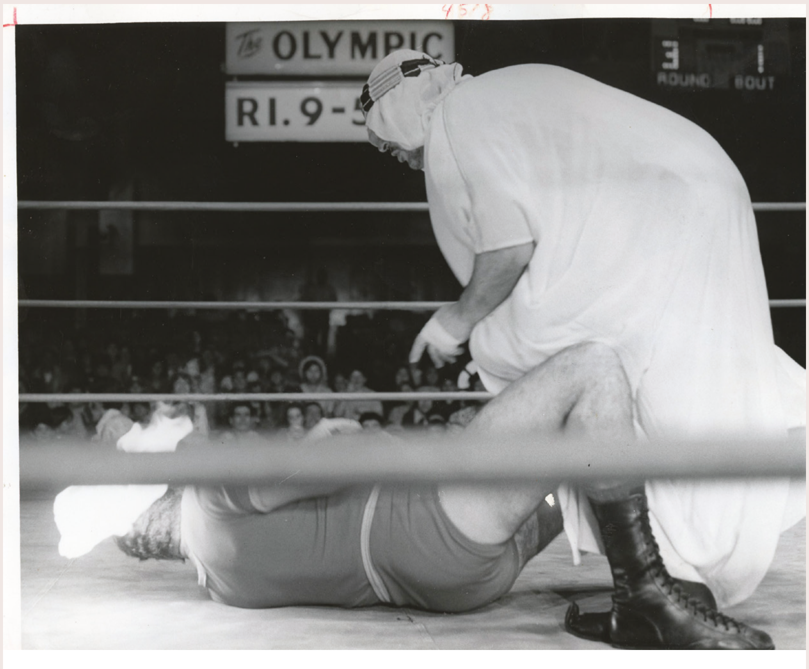
town, they would draw a bigger gate because you'd heard of them. And, in the absence of any other information, you would construct your idea of them, and those ideas had weight.

I'm reading these in magazines about a guy I'm never going to see wrestle. I was old enough to know that he wasn't really burning anybody—even in wrestling, somebody would sue somebody over a thing like that. But do you have any real way of knowing that? "Fire Editorial" is based on an actual editorial I read back then, something that left an impression on me because it was so overwrought. They were great fiction; somebody, maybe even Ed Farhat himself, writing "The Sheik must be stopped, he is burning people alive and causing genuine harm to his fellow wrestler" ... which feels a certain way when you don't have all the information. Why is nobody stopping him? Well, because he's the boss in Michigan. The only guy who can discipline The Sheik is The Sheik. The beauty of a guy like him wasn't that he was the boss of the territory, it's what you read about him: the rituals, the crazed brawling, the fire. That's a story. Everything else is just information.

The Sheik's reputation as a violent "disgrace to the sport" was furthered by wrestling magazines like this one. Such verbiage decrying his infamous fireballs has stuck with John Darnielle to this day.
PHOTO BY THEO EHRET



BECCA 4EVER

RAISING HELL IN THE STUDIO AND THE RING

TEXT BY CANDACE CORDELIA

PHOTOS BY MATT FLOOD

Artist ...
Celebrity Fighter ...
Pop Star. *PWI* goes
backstage with one of
indie wrestling's most
exciting acts

B3CCA drops TJ Crawford with a precision cutter. The Boston native's ring skills and ambitious pop music efforts have drawn equal attention from fans across the U.S.

PITCH PERFECT, THE 2012 cult classic movie that spawned pop culture interest in a cappella singing, stars multi-hyphenate Hollywood star Anna Kendrick as a character named "Beca." Although their names might appear to be homonyms, B3CCA—the wrestling pop star and self-professed "Celebrity Fighter"—would prefer you pronounce her name differently.

"It's B-3-c-c-a," she told *PWI* during our interview in March 2025. "You can say 'Becca,' but that is the correct spelling. Or 'B-three-a,' or, really, 'B-3-c-c-a,' I think is what I'm going by right now."

With that early admonition, B3CCA showed a sense of pride and assertiveness. And, as time went on in our conversation, those traits turned out to be an emergent theme for the performer—a young woman who has spent a considerable period of her post-collegiate life as both a professional wrestler and musician.

B3CCA fans first got to know her as the bubbly "Leader Of The Scrunchie Squad" on the New England independent circuit, before she developed a more abrasive attitude that coincided with greater success in the ring. Some of her accomplishments include reigns as the MCW Women's champion, Northeast Championship Wrestling Women's champion, and a two-time CW Pan Optic (intergender) champion. The Boston native also made her live TV debut on *WWE Smackdown* (facing Lacey Evans), wrestled multiple bouts on AEW programming, and became an indie darling, thanks to appearances for Limitless Wrestling, Beyond, GCW, and Chaotic Wrestling.

Never shy about reaching for a live mic, B3CCA can verbally assault a live crowd as easily as she can serenade them.

Just a few years into B3CCA's career, she had reinvented herself as an ambitious, although somewhat out-of-control pop star. And as she spent more time in the studio—or, as often happened, taking to Instagram to address tabloid rumors about her—she stepped up her game as a grappler, even becoming a top contender to the Major League Wrestling World featherweight championship. Her efforts got her included on the *PWI* "Women's 250" and "Top Prospects" lists.

However, after reports of a knee injury in late-2023, B3CCA's winning streak was cut short. It took nearly a full year until she made a triumphant return to the ring, reminding her fanbase of her finesse as both a wrestler and a vocalist. Now, she has her first full-length album, titled *SMILEY FACE*, to boast on her ever-growing resume. Upon first listen, each track overflows with fluorescent, in-your-face songs, comparable to "Pop The Glock" vocalist and noughties muse, Uffie—a comparison the singer-songwriter-wrestler appreciates.

"I love that you mentioned Uffie," said B3CCA. "She is definitely a huge influence on me. She has that one song ("Difficult") that's like, 'Don't worry if I write rhymes/I write checks.' I mean, talk about influencing B3CCA! Like, come on. That's so good. So yeah, Uffie. I love that. I love that reference."

Sure, there are B3CCA "haters," who might shun her attempts at pop stardom. But those skeptics should know that she's been hard at work for years. "I've always been interested in music," she said. "When I was younger, I did some community theater. I played violin in orchestra. But I was … not very good. I was always second violin; I never got to be first. But that's okay because it wasn't really too much of my thing anyways."

What ended up being B3CCA's thing, at least where music is concerned, was finding her way as a solo artist after spending some time in a punk/hardcore band where she played drums. She's still "close" with her former bandmates, but confessed how difficult it can be in a group dynamic, especially within the punk/hardcore music scene.

"It can be a tense environment," B3CCA explained. "Working together with people is a lot different than making music on your own. It was a really cool experience. But I think I'm too much of a solo star now to do the whole band thing again. It's not like I'm not collaborative. Everyone had a different idea for what the group was gonna be and

B3CCA clutches an iPod—a must-have 2010s musical accessory—during a photoshoot for her album *SMILEY FACE*.

During a recent outing for Create A Pro, the "Celebrity Fighter" showcases her agility and submission prowess.

do. And I'm very passionate about my ideas and my creative vision. Especially when it's my time and my image, I don't necessarily want to compromise. So, that was a little challenging."

From that point forward, B3CCA decided to invest more of her time into wrestling and her studies. After graduating, she dove back into music, but of the "hyper pop" variety. As she reminisced on her musical influences from the "2014, 2015 hyper pop era," it became even clearer how intertwined her wrestling and music careers have become.

"... Uffie, the Charli XCX music of that time. 'Vroom Vroom' by Charli XCX just came out around that time. Sophie. Kero Kero Bonito ... I actually used one of their songs as my first entrance music," said B3CCA. "I think that's actually how I decided to make my first song, because I was using a Kero Kero Bonito song. I have a friend that does a lot of music production, and we were like, *What if we just made me my own song that kind of sounds like that?* That's kind of how it started. That's back when I was still being the scrunchie girl."

As B3CCA further explored her musical creativity, her wrestling persona saw a "natural progression" into the rising star we see today. Acknowledging her early Scrunchie Squad era as "very fun," she now feels free to combine her passions for wrestling and pop music in an authentic way. Since having traded in her scrunchies for flashier, glitterball-inspired gear, ultimately branding herself as the "The Pop Star," B3CCA has continued to step up her in-ring game, while also attempting to sway crowds into appreciating her electro pop-meets-graps vision.

"I think wrestling fans don't particularly have great music taste all the time," she confessed. "I'm not knocking this genre of music. I actually love it and listen to it all the time. But, like, dad rock ... Creed. That's what we like! Someone comes out singing Creed, they're gonna stand up and clap. I performed a Creed song at a show once, so it's not like I'm above Creed. *But* I think that wrestling fans don't always know how to react to my music because it's different. Because it is that kind of experimental pop."

Ultimately, whether the fans love her or love to hate her, it is B3CCA's musical presentation that helps her stand apart from the rest of the indie wrestling pack. "It is quite a different audience and you get *very* different reactions," she said, acknowledging that she is still working to perform her music with the utmost confidence in front of some tough crowds.

From her Scrunchie Squad days to her current era, B3CCA's enthusiasm and sense of self-possession are palpable. Her work ethic also continues to impress: She's working on some "better" choreography and dancing, along with new music on the horizon. "Keep an ear out for those," she advised.

For future wrestling matches, B3CCA hopes to diversify her entrance music performances. "I want to do more, different songs," she said. "I would love to diss my opponent to their face. I think that would be really fun."

She continued: "I want people to not know what I'm going to sing when I come out and be surprised by that. I think that would be a really fun way to engage with people and have some fun conversations with fans ... and have some fun interactions with my opponents, as well."

Additionally, B3CCA has a long list of performers she'd love to collaborate with in the recording studio: "Gucci Gucci" rapper/singer Kreayshawn; Joe Hendry ("Talking about Creed, he's exactly what I'm describing. He plays the music that the people wanna hear, which is great! I believe in Joe Hendry."); Harley Cameron ("Easy choice. Probably one of the most talented musical people involved in wrestling"); and Shaloncé ("She is so fun. Her wrestling, her look, her music. She has an amazing voice, too. I'm just blown away").

B3CCA also expressed an interest in this month's "One To Watch," the Nightmare Factory-trained Brooke Havok. "I've been wanting to do an emo song for a long time, and I have something I've been sitting on," teased B3CCA. "I have a track I've been sitting on for a while that I feel is a perfect combination of Brooke Havok and B3CCA. Hopefully, we can make that happen."

In addition, if given the chance, B3CCA would love to work with TNA Knockout Steph De Lander on another track. The two collaborated on the song "2 BAD B—ES," one of the singles from the album *SMILEY FACE*.

"Steph is an icon. I don't know a lot of people in wrestling who work as hard as she does," declared B3CCA. "She really puts everything into what her creative visions are. I think of her as an artist ... We might be collaborating in the future. I would love to. I know she would, too, but she's very busy with TNA right now."

B3CCA continues to live her double life as a wrestler and recording artist with *savoir vivre*. By the time of this article's release, she will have competed in some hotly anticipated matches on the independent circuit, while preparing to release more music videos and a new album that's "going to be very different" from her last one. For some, the thought of juggling all of these endeavors might seem incomprehensible. For B3CCA, it's all part and parcel of being an international pop star and wrestling superstar on the rise.

If B3CCA gets her way, look for her future opponents to be subjected to live diss tracks. Audiences will never know what to expect!

> "I think wrestling fans don't always know how to react to my music because it's different."

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EL TIRABUZON **67** | THE IRISH WHIP **68** | COAST TO COAST **69**

Swerve
REALEST

RICOCHET hurtles toward **SWERVE STRICKLAND** with a flying clothesline. Get the scoop on Ricochet's post-WWE renaissance in this month's "Righteous Wrap Up."

Photo by **DOMINIQUE DINH**

MARCH MADNESS

The NCAA Basketball Tournaments produce high ratings, but fear not: Despite this friendly competition, WrestleMania Season is a dominant force, too.

FOCUS ON ...

WWE SMACKDOWN

SMACKDOWN **VIEWER NUMBERS [USA]**

February 7: **1,507,000**
February 14: **1,422,000**
February 21: **1,736,000**
February 28: **1,731,000**
March 7: **1,741,000**
March 14: **1,571,000**

ANALYSIS *Smackdown* excelled during WrestleMania Season, with three consecutive episodes drawing over 1.7 million viewers. Jimmy Uso isn't considered "Main Event," but "Big Jim" earned something of a surprise win over Drew McIntyre on February 21; The Rock encouraged WWE Undisputed champ Cody Rhodes to sell his soul on February 28; and, on March 7, a black-eyed Rhodes addressed John Cena's betrayal at Elimination Chamber while McIntyre avenged his previous loss to Uso. All three shows surpassed the *Smackdown* premiere on September 13, 2024, which had attracted 1,723,000 viewers. However, the USA Network is not Fox or Netflix. Episodes leading to last year's WrestleMania were drawing between 2.3 and 2.5 million. Pay attention to April 18: That could be *Smackdown's* highest-rated episode since returning to USA.

Stephanie Vaquer connects with a huge backbreaker on Giulia during their NXT title-vs.-title bout.

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WWE'S GLOBAL REACH

AS MENTIONED LAST issue, the closest metric to viewer numbers that is available for *Raw* can be found at Netflix's Tudum website, which lists the streaming service's top 10 shows each week. As long as *Raw* continues to make the top 10, we'll have reliable numbers.

And those numbers have been great. The PLE effect (formerly known as the PPV effect) is back, as the post-Royal Rumble edition earned 3,100,000 global views. This figure is determined by dividing the time all subscribers spend watching a program by its duration.

Men's Royal Rumble winner Jey Uso addressed the fans before World champion Gunther interrupted him, Women's World champ Rhea Ripley confronted Women's Rumble winner Charlotte Flair, and Kevin Owens heinously attacked best friend Sami Zayn, finishing him off with a piledriver—the same maneuver that put Randy Orton on the disabled list.

Likewise, the March 3 edition, following Elimination Chamber, also scored 3.1 million views. While Cena turning on Rhodes would be more relevant on *Smackdown*, CM Punk addressed that issue and more in a captivating opening segment, and Iyo Sky earned an unexpected win over Rhea Ripley for the Women's World title, re-setting the stage for WrestleMania.

Raw usually ranks in the middle of Netflix's weekly top 10, but even more impressive was Elimination Chamber's showing in international markets despite being dropped only 36 hours before the end of the rankings period. (WWE PLEs stream on Peacock in the U.S.) Across the globe, EC scored ahead of that week's *Raw* in most markets, and, according to Cageside Seats, ranked number two in Bolivia and number five in the United Kingdom.

NXT'S NEXT-LEVEL RATINGS

Stephanie Vaquer became pro wrestling's latest belt collector, adding Giulia's NXT Women's championship to her own Women's North American title on the March 11 special "Roadblock" edition of *NXT* on The CW. That main event was one of several factors that helped draw 735,000 viewers.

The episode included several current TNA stars and a few who have recently signed WWE contracts, with NXT champion Oba Femi turning back Moose, Jordynne Grace pinning Roxanne Perez, and TNA World tag team champions The Hardys defeating Nathan Frazer & Axiom. If that weren't enough, Je'Von Evans beat Ethan Page in a streetfight, boasting a mix of wild brawling and technical, high-impact moves.

Surprisingly, *NXT's* regular episodes score as well as its specials. Numbers for "Roadblock" and "New Year's Evil" (798,000) were impressive, yet a few regular episodes surpassed 800,000—which is another indicator of *NXT's* consistent following. Compare these CW numbers to what *NXT* was scoring last year on USA, which were routinely in the 600,000-700,000 range.

NXT's move to network television was beneficial indeed. Just don't look at its viewership on March 19. It dropped to 676,000 against stiff competition, including two NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament games on TruTV. Madness!

COLLIDING WITH THE NCAA

Conversely, *AEW Collision* was unaffected—and perhaps even helped—by a full slate of NCAA and NBA games on Saturday, March 15. Perhaps it meant, simply, that more people were at home watching television throughout the day, including prime time. *Collision's* viewers increased by 12 percent, to 408,000, on TNT.

Despite conventional wisdom that storylines are more effective than in-ring action, this episode featured two International championship eliminator tournament bouts, Katsuyori Shibata vs. Ricochet and Mark Briscoe vs. Mark Davis, with the winner of the tourney to face new champion Kenny Omega at Dynasty.

As of press time, AEW planned to split *Collision* into two one-hour episodes on the weekend of March 22-23, getting underway after basketball ends on Saturday and Sunday, respectively, which should make for some interesting analysis.

CONTINUING TO EVOLVE

Gabe Sapolsky's pioneering Evolve promotion—which showcased stars ranging from Johnny Gargano and Matt Riddle to Josh Briggs and Timothy Thatcher—was another regrettable casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. But Chief Content Officer Paul "Triple H" Levesque sees value in current WWE writer Sapolsky's input and the marketability of the brand, tapping WWE's new *Evolve* program to replace *NXT Level Up*, which had been available on Peacock.

When asked about the project at the post-Royal Rumble press conference, Levesque replied, "*Evolve* will showcase a lot of talent from our WWE ID program, and feature talent that are training in the Performance Center now, where we have 100, 120 talent training there at all times. Some are just getting started, and this is a way for them to sort of cut their teeth and get that experience in front of live crowds and doing live television."

Evolve premiered on the streaming service Tubi on March 5. Featuring particularly strong women's action, the first episodes boasted established stars Kylie Rae and Gallus while spotlighting up-and-comers Layla Diggs, Kali Armstrong, Haze Jameson, Jordan Oasis, and the statuesque Sam Holloway.

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SPOTLIGHT MATCH

JON MOXLEY VS. ADAM COPELAND

AEW DYNAMITE, MARCH 19

Copeland brought more savagery than Moxley expected, with the 51-year-old star smacking the World champion in the abdomen with a board of nails. Then, Copeland nailed Moxley with the board again, this time across his back, and the board remained grotesquely attached as he began to bleed. Copeland dominated this streetfight, with assorted Death Riders running in to interfere. In the end, "Mox" capitalized and applied a bulldog headlock, forcing "Cope" to pass out.

TWO TO TANGO

A conversation with two stars of *Queen of the Ring* shines a light on wrestling's past and present, while also drawing an apt comparison between pro grappling and another art form.

Emily Bett Rickards, as Mildred Burke, clutches the NWA World Women's championship belt—a prize that is now affectionately called "The Burke" within the NWA ranks. PHOTO BY STEVE SQUALL/COURTESY OF SUMERIAN PICTURES

THIS TIME OF YEAR, WrestleMania Season, is akin to the holidays for wrestling fans. And just like Christmas morning for so many children around the world, who descend to their family Christmas trees to see what gifts Santa has bestowed upon them, WrestleMania Weekend invites throngs of eager devotees of the squared circle who can't wait to meet their favorite wrestlers, buy coveted merch, and attend as many shows as their attention spans will allow.

As *PWI* staff prepares to celebrate this year's WrestleMania 41, this edition of "Mat, Stage, & Screen" provides a look into the past and future of wrestling, featuring eye-opening interviews with two cast members of Ash Avildsen's *Queen of the Ring* film (which is reviewed earlier in this issue by *PWI's* Karen Peterson).

For me, looking back on these interviews reminds me just how much wrestling (and those who have carved their chapters in the sport) has come from its earliest beginnings, and where the athleticism and art of wrestling are potentially headed.

Happy reading ... and Happy WrestleMania Holidays to you and yours!

* * * * * * * * * * *

I have a confession to make: I knew very little about Mildred Burke's personal and professional life story before watching *Queen of the Ring*. (In fact, fellow *PWI* colleague Pat Laprade's *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle* is on my list of books to revisit this summer!) But maybe it was all for the better, seeing *Queen of the Ring* with limited information about Burke's trailblazing career.

In my humble opinion, the movie is one of the best sports dramas I've seen in a very long time; and the performances etched on celluloid by everyone in the cast are nothing short of tremendous. Two of the movie's cast members, Kailey Latimer (Kamille) and Damaris

PUZZLING
PIERSON
HALF RHIN

Burke is challenged by June Byers (Kailey "Kamille" Latimer) during *Queen of the Ring's* pivotal fairgrounds scene.
PHOTO BY STEVE SQUALL/COURTESY OF SUMERIAN PICTURES

Lewis, are particularly effective in their portrayals of women's wrestling pioneers June Byers and Babs Wingo, respectively. And I had the great privilege of interviewing both ahead of the movie's March 7 premiere.

When asked about preparing for their characters both physically and mentally, with the historical aspects of the movie and the real-life women they played in mind, Latimer and Lewis both held their assigned roles, Byers and Wingo, in high regard.

"I think for me, the first thing that came to mind was honor," began Lewis. "Ensuring that I honored Babs to the best of my ability, especially because this is going to be the first time that anybody had ever seen her on the big screen. So, just getting it right to our greatest ability."

Latimer added, "There's not a lot out there! It's not like that was during the time of TV programming, the internet, anything like that. We're so spoiled today to be able to do this interview, to be able to have things documented so easily. We had stuff [sent to us] from old newspapers ..."

"... magazines!" interjected Lewis.

"Yes," said Latimer, who, under the ring name Kamille, is best known for her own lengthy run as NWA World Women's champion. "And when we were studying, as far as how they moved in the ring, we were talking about [how] there wasn't that much footage. And even the stuff that was, it was kind of grainy. And so, just trying to learn how they moved in the ring, it's like there was only but so much that we could play off of."

Latimer continued: "But, the beautiful thing about it is ... Candace, we've spoken before. You're a huge wrestling fan. You love wrestling and even you don't know about this—about Mildred's story and these ladies' stories. And that's for a lot of the wrestling world. A lot of people don't know Mildred's story. Not only is this going to be a new story for people that don't know anything about wrestling; it's going to be a new story for wrestling fans! Everyone's going to learn something from watching this film."

Aside from Latimer's prediction, which I wholeheartedly agree with, it was also a breath of fresh air hearing how Lewis' former dance training proved advantageous to her wrestling training for *Queen of the Ring*.

"I studied tango," Lewis told me. "Tango is all about changing weight. It's about knowing that your partner is sometimes the leader and sometimes the follower. And so, the thing about tango ... is that if someone pushes your shoulder, it tells your body where to go. It tells your legs where to move. But, if I'm taller than you ..."

"...Which she will be," Latimer playfully added.

"... But if I'm taller than you, and you're my partner, right, it means that I have to shorten my step a little bit," Lewis continued. "And you have to elongate your step a little bit in order for the dance to be beautiful. If your ego says 'No, I'm not, you have to come to me,' the dance is broken. So that tango training, getting in the ring with the girls, was very similar to me because you have to throw your ego out and say, *Okay, right now in the choreography, it's* her *moment,* which means you're gonna fall back. And then vice-versa. And then, it'd be your moment, and then somebody else fell back for you."

For Latimer, who most recently competed as Kamille for All Elite Wrestling, Lewis' realization hit home. "She also didn't realize that she was just talking about ring awareness, too, with the little steps," said Latimer. "See, you know stuff you don't even know you know!"

Following its well-regarded limited theatrical release, *Queen of the Ring* should be available to stream at home in the not-so-distant future.

BY KRISTEN ASHLY

A NATURAL FIT

When **NATALYA** was named as the latest WWE star to take part in **JOSH BARNETT'S** Bloodsport, some fans were shocked. Here's why they shouldn't be.

Natalya (Nattie Neidhart) locks in the sharpshooter on Lola Vice during an NXT Underground battle—a match format heavily influenced by the Bloodsport presentation.

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IN EARLY-MARCH 2025, MMA fighter and pro wrestler Josh Barnett announced on social media that Nattie Neidhart, known as Natalya to WWE fans, would compete in his GCW event, Bloodsport, over WrestleMania Weekend. More than a few fans expressed surprise that the WWE women's stalwart would be stepping out to fight on a show that one could consider raw wrestling. Given her family legacy, they shouldn't act so shocked.

Now a staple of the Game Changer Wrestling calendar, Bloodsport features worked-shoot matches that are both bare-bones and hard-hitting, employing elements of MMA and catch wrestling. The rules are simple but brutal: Every match must end in a knockout or submission. The fighters compete without the benefit of ropes or turnbuckles. Savagery and strength win the fight.

Since Bloodsport's inception in 2018, the wrestlers booked often have MMA training or shoot-style experience, giving them the upper hand and knowledge it takes to work the show safely. The likes of Jon Moxley, Miyu Yamashita, Marina Shafir, and Minoru Suzuki have appeared on Bloodsport cards.

Beginning in 2024, wrestlers currently signed with WWE started stepping onto the Bloodsport canvas; an exciting development that included Charlie Dempsey, Karmen Petrovic, Julius & Brutus Creed, and Shayna Baszler. Those competitors all made sense in the context. They all have shoot-style, MMA, or karate experience—or, in Dempsey's case, no-frills catch wrestling runs in the family.

So, when Natalya was announced as a competitor for Bloodsport's April show, it made perfect sense. Nattie Neidhart comes from a long line of Hart Family wrestling greats. She is the daughter of Jim Neidhart, the niece of Owen and Bret Hart, and the granddaughter of a man with a merciless reputation, Stu Hart.

Stu Hart, of course, created the legendary Hart Dungeon. Housed in the basement of Hart's own home, the Dungeon had a setup not unlike Bloodsport's: mat on the floor without any ropes, and the added challenge of a low ceiling. The elder Hart schooled wrestlers in the Dungeon using weights and catch wrestling, holding practices similar to MMA training.

Hart was considered a harsh trainer, who ran a school often likened to a torture chamber. But it helped mold would-be legends such as Jushin Thunder Liger, Roddy Piper, "Superstar" Graham, and Jake Roberts. It also produced Nattie Neidhart: the only woman to train and graduate from the Dungeon.

As the sole woman in her family to master the family craft—and one with 25 years of experience under her belt—participating in a Bloodsport event is simply the next grueling challenge for Nattie Neidhart. WWE's Natalya has the background and technical know-how to put her in a winning position in a shoot-style fight. With a shelf of accolades, this is the perfect time for Nattie (and by extension WWE) to let her talent echo through the indie space.

It's not the first time she's been seen in the American indies. Indeed, she preceded her WWE run with fantastic independent showings at the likes of SHIMMER and AAW. But this is the first time we get to see Nattie symbolically remove her gloves. "Nasty," "The BOAT," "The Natural"... all nicknames she can showcase in one of the most violent shows of the year.

Don't doubt Nattie's ability to be coarse; she's a lifelong member of the Hart dynasty.

RICOCHET RENAISSANCE

In AEW, the former WWE superstar has reinvented himself as a top-tier antagonist.

PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE DINH

Ricochet wears down Swerve Strickland during their heated match at AEW Revolution. Once beloved for his death-defying ring style, Ricochet is now equally hated for his obnoxious behavior.

THE 22-YEAR CAREER of Ricochet has been a rollercoaster of moments, moves, and matches that have dazzled fans all across the world. The man has taken on many forms, debuting in little gyms across the Southern U.S. against Chuck Taylor. He delivered double-moonsaults in Japan for Dragongate, and generation-defining matches against Will Ospreay. Later, he donned a mask and became the luchador "Prince Puma" in Lucha Underground. And, of course, he defied gravity on the biggest wrestling stage on the planet.

Ricochet spent many years in WWE trying to find his footing and place within the massive company. He had the opportunity to showcase himself in some ways during his time there—specifically, in Money in the Bank ladder matches, other multi-men scramble matches, and, toward the end, as the three-minute match SPEED champion on Twitter/X.

Never in that time did fans get the opportunity to find out who Ricochet was as a character, beyond the fact he was an out-of-this-world aerialist. Upon his debut in AEW, fans wondered: Would we see more from the generational high-flyer, or would it be more of the same?

Ricochet in AEW was going to be different because he was joining a roster full of some of the best high-flyers in the world. There was the man who many consider the pound-for-pound best wrestler and flyer on the planet, Will Ospreay; the incredible PAC; a who's who of amazing luchadores, including Hologram and Komander; not to mention guys like Dante Martin, and so many more in the locker room. He was going to a land of people who knew how to flip.

Despite his 20-plus-year career, Ricochet was still arriving in the company with something to prove. He was a great wrestler who can have good matches, but he needed more. And so, Ricochet entered into the AEW Continental Classic. With a field consisting of the aforementioned Ospreay, Kazuchika Okada, Claudio Castagnoli, and Brody King, Ricochet was going to have to step right up to show that he was a step above the rest.

Midway through the tournament, something clicked. Fans started to grow resentful of Ricochet … and Ricochet started to use the hate to fuel the change in his character. At a point, he got locked into a feud with Swerve Strickland. And, after being showered with toilet paper in the Hammerstein Ballroom, things completely changed for Ricochet.

The Kentucky native was given the opportunity to speak on his change of character, and that's where he really started to shine. He's shown the same confidence on the mic as he's shown for the last 20 years when the bell rings. And with his added "AHAAA" catchphrase—a tribute to legendary rapper Jadakiss—Ricochet has garnered even more anger and disdain from the AEW fans.

Those changes put a new perspective on what Ricochet represented to the fans. He attacked Swerve Strickland during a match between Strickland and Jay White, busting him open with scissors. Fans could physically see the shift in Ricochet's eyes right there on *AEW Dynamite*.

The transformation felt sudden. But, to Ricochet, this was years and years of thought and emotions finally coming to light. Ricochet has become one of the most hated wrestlers in AEW—and has become so much more than the guy who flips. It's another nod for Swerve Strickland, who, adding to his rivalry with "Hangman" Adam Page, has brought out a different level of hatred from his opponents.

Ricochet has strung together some great matches in AEW against Ospreay, Okada, Swerve, AR Fox, and Darby Allin, showing he's still one of the best in the world on top of the great promos. After 20+ years in the game, Ricochet has a new lease on wrestling life.

ENTREPRENEURIAL POWERHOUSE

From working with **ALPHA ACADEMY** to creating her own fashion line, **MAXXINE DUPRI** is supremely adaptable.

PHOTO BY BELLA PIETY (@BELLACREATIVE.CO)

Maxxine Dupri models clothing from her JAUNTY line.

ONE THING MAXXINE DUPRI isn't ashamed of is rebranding.

We first met the WWE superstar as Von Wagner's valet, Sofia Cromwell, in NXT before she served as Maximum Male Models' "Director Of Talent" on *Smackdown* and *Raw*. Eventually, she joined Alpha Academy's stable—and made the transition from villain to fan favorite. Through it all, Dupri's hard work has been undeniable to wrestling fans.

The Arizona native has been walking an entrepreneurial path since her early-20s, when she founded her fashion brand, JAUNTY. Now an activewear line of "luxe" and "attainable" clothing and accessories, Dupri's company began life as a boutique clothing shop where she licensed and sold other brands.

"Both of my parents were entrepreneurs," she told me. "I grew up kind of knowing that I wanted my own brand. When I was younger, I was a competitive dancer, so I thought maybe I'd have a dance studio or a dancewear line. Then, my life evolved as I got older, [and] I was living in Los Angeles. I was cheering for the Rams. I had so many jobs. I worked at SoulCycle. I worked at Orangetheory. I worked at a bunch of dance studios. I was all over the place, and I really wanted something that felt like mine."

Dupri's parents instilled in her the belief that being a business owner meant financial stability and empowerment. "JAUNTY came at a time when I really needed it," she shared. "I was grieving the loss of my brother, going through a lot of things, and I just needed something to ground me."

Four months after Dupri opened her popular storefront in Arizona, WWE came calling ... along with a move to Florida. Thus began a new chapter for the JAUNTY brand. "I was selling clothes that matched my lifestyle," said Dupri. "Then, I dove into wrestling, and I was living in activewear. And it just felt right and organic to flow into that style."

While the move to activewear proved fruitful, managing a business from another time zone was challenging. "I had the storefront when I first signed. In my head, I had no idea what it was gonna look like. I was like, *I'm sure I can fly back and check on it sometime*. No, no, no," she said with a laugh.

Until January 2025, Dupri kept the shop going, aided by her employees and one of her best friends. Then, focused on creating the best online brand possible, she chose to close the brick-and-mortar location. "It's a bummer because I loved the storefront," she said. "At the same time, my passion is being Maxxine, being in WWE, wrestling."

In WWE, Dupri finds support from her colleagues, including Chelsea Green, who's offered helpful feedback on the JAUNTY line. She also names WWE Women's champion Tiffany Stratton, Nia Jax, and Natalya as being "so supportive" of the brand. "They don't even say anything, they just purchase from my website," she revealed.

But Dupri's ultimate inspiration? The Bella Twins. "I'm talking 2019, 2020 ... I was listening to their podcast. I was following their brands, the way they've launched into the wine business. Hosting ... everything they touch turns to gold," she said. "Everything they do is successful because they do it wholeheartedly and let us see them. And that's why I'm so drawn to them."

She continued: "I was telling Nikki at the (Royal) Rumble that my screensaver was a photo of her modeling Birdiebee. Her abs were shredded, and it was literally my lock screen, 'cause she's always been my inspiration. Not just the body, but also modeling your own brand."

Now, Maxxine Dupri's doing just the same with JAUNTY.

TOWERING FIGURES

"The Manager Of Champions" sings the praises of **MEGAN BAYNE**, **MANCE WARNER**, and **STEPH DE LANDER** (among others).

PHOTO COURTESY TNA WRESTLING

Mance Warner and Steph De Lander stand over a fallen Sami Callihan at Sacrifice. Pollo Del Mar praises the duo as an exciting addition to TNA programming.

WHILE AEW'S TREATMENT of many incoming stars is often suspect, they made me eat my words with Mariah May. In "The Glamour," they created absolute magic.

May's unfolding relationship and rivalry with Toni Storm proved nothing short of epic! The storytelling and trio of matches impeccably done, the women delivered a tale which, to borrow a phrase, is simply "Timeless."

May becoming a bona fide star on American soil fans optimism for fellow Stardom standout Megan Bayne. Since returning to AEW from Japan, Bayne has decimated the competition, quickly turning her attention to Storm and the AEW Women's World title.

It's a trajectory I once thought belonged to old friend Kamille. Months back, "The Brickhouse," aligned with Mercedes Mone, showed tremendous promise. Despite expectations that the former NWA World Women's champion might soon challenge for AEW gold, she faded from view far too quickly. (As I said ... "suspect.")

With Kamille's eyes for the moment on Hollywood, the towering Bayne steps into the spotlight I bullishly reserved for the *Queen of the Ring* star. Like her predecessor, Bayne cuts an imposing figure, dwarfing even AEW's top powerhouse, Kris Statlander.

Given her unparalleled size and strength advantage, and a devious mind to match, I predict an AEW champion shall soon sacrifice their title to this goddess from Thessalonica!

TNA GAME CHANGER

Something about the chaos Mance Warner brings to TNA just feels *right*.

Fresh from spilling EFFY's blood across the country, their war for dominance and the Game Changer Wrestling championship a decided "Feud Of The Year" candidate, Warner's TNA arrival was a shock. It came into focus, though, when he immediately joined a returning Steph De Lander.

Trading her former love for a younger, potentially *more* maniacal (if that's even possible?) paramour, De Lander publicly split from PCO. Not returning her ring was only the beginning, as the wicked Australian beauty claimed the TNA Digital Media title via divorce. I personally espouse taking *all* exes to the cleaners, whenever possible, so good on you, Steph!

With Warner's trademark violence introduced, the equally unstable Sami Callihan answered the call. "The Southern Psychopath" notched a significant win in their brutal match at TNA Sacrifice.

Though unlikely to end the rivalry, victory over a former TNA World champion bodes well for Mance and what's to come. With the Digital Media champion at his side, Warner's path of destruction is certain to continue—and that makes me *very* happy.

GET YOUR KICKS

In February, I debuted with Duke City Championship Wrestling.

It was a jaw-dropping moment for the Albuquerque-based promotion. With my timely unveiling, allowing "The Looks That Kill" Bryan Idol to retain his DCCW Route 66 championship, I remain the undisputed "Champion Of Managers."

That same night, the company was introduced as the newest National Wrestling Alliance territory. Now under the NWA New Mexico banner, owner Fred Slow and his team are the seventh regional promotion to join NWA in two years.

DCCW has an incredible roster and draws raucous crowds at Albuquerque's historic El Rey Theater. I hope to terrorize them all for months to come!

BRAINBUSTERS

BY *PWI* STAFF

MAKIN' MOVES

See how many of the famous wrestling maneuvers you can find from the list below.

X	C	B	X	W	R	E	N	Z	U	I	G	I	R	I
N	E	C	B	A	C	K	B	R	E	A	K	E	R	T
O	B	X	A	A	H	U	Z	Y	C	R	D	G	F	M
I	A	O	E	R	E	R	T	B	R	E	R	B	T	H
S	R	J	R	L	O	V	A	T	V	R	V	F	M	H
W	C	E	B	H	P	E	T	B	E	I	M	I	I	H
O	J	O	V	A	S	U	T	T	M	R	J	U	S	E
L	W	A	G	I	Q	A	S	E	F	R	K	L	T	A
F	E	M	C	D	R	U	L	P	M	E	A	D	I	D
K	K	G	W	M	B	D	U	P	B	M	F	N	C	L
W	C	H	D	N	A	N	E	D	S	V	E	F	A	O
C	I	A	I	R	C	D	E	L	Q	V	I	H	O	C
P	K	A	C	H	O	P	H	V	I	N	W	Z	X	K
G	R	C	U	D	O	P	A	D	X	P	Y	N	Q	H
B	V	E	R	T	E	B	R	E	A	K	E	R	L	F

ARMBAR
BACKBREAKER
BRAINBUSTER
CHOP
CRAB
CRADLE
CUTTER
DIVE
ELBOW
ENZUIGIRI
FLOWSION
HEADLOCK
KICK
LEGDROP
METEORA
MISTICA
PILEDRIVER
PUNCH
RANA
SLAM
SPLASH
SUPLEX
TOPE
VERTEBREAKER
WHIP

NEXT-GEN NAMES

DRAW A LINE FROM THE ACTIVE WRESTLERS IN LIST 1 TO THEIR FAMOUS RELATIVES IN LIST 2.

LIST 1

Galeno Del Mal
Charlie Dempsey
Carmella
Jacob Fatu
Sexy Star II
Zilla Fatu
Lexis King
Raquel Rodriguez

List 2

Tonga Kid
Paul Van Dale
Dr. Wagner Jr.
Brian Pillman
Rick Gonzalez
Umaga
William Regal
La Gatubela

ANSWER KEY: Galeno Del Mal & Dr. Wagner Jr.; Charlie Dempsey & William Regal; Carmella & Paul Van Dale; Jacob Fatu & Tonga Kid; Sexy Star II & La Gatubela; Zilla Fatu & Umaga; Lexis King & Brian Pillman; Raquel Rodriguez & Rick Gonzalez

El Desperado, Templario, and Mistico celebrate a trios victory on the Aichi, Japan, stop of the Fantasticamania tour.

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LUCHAMANIA

CMLL and New Japan's Fantasticamania series returns to Japan; Lucha Libre AAA signs a top free agent.

CONSEJO MUNDIAL DE LUCHA Libre held its annual joint tour of Japan along with New Japan Pro-Wrestling. For only the third time in the series' 14-year history, Fantasticamania took place in February, rather than the traditional month of January—which was the norm from 2011 to 2020. Regardless of the time frame in which it is held, one thing that has not changed about Fantasticamania is the quality of the matches on display.

This time around, CMLL spared no expense and sent its best and brightest over to the Land of the Rising Sun. For eight days, luchadores including **Mistico**, **Atlantis Jr.**, and **Hechicero** faced off against some of the top stars NJPW had to offer, such as **Taiji Ishimori**, **Tetsuya Naito**, and **Hiroshi Tanahashi** (arguably among the most popular wrestlers from their respective companies).

But CMLL is not only sending its best to Japan; it's also hosting some of the best Japanese wrestlers in its own backyard. **Konosuke Takeshita**, one of All Elite Wrestling's brightest future stars, recently made his much-awaited debut in Mexico ... and went all out in doing so. Takeshita competed in front of a sold-out crowd at Arena Mexico, defending the NEVER openweight championship against **Angel de Oro** in what was easily the match of the night.

Lastly on the CMLL side of things, Arena Mexico was set to host three other international wrestlers. Unlike Takeshita, these athletes do have a history in Mexico. AEW stars—and former AAA luchadores—**Komander** and **Hologram** (formerly known as **Aramis**) were set to make their debuts in the lucha "Cathedral" against Mistico and **Mascara Dorada**. It would be a blockbuster CMLL vs. AEW tag team match at "Homenaje A Dos Leyendas," or "Tribute For Two Legends." Meanwhile, **Taya Valkyrie**, another former AAA star, would make her very first appearance in Arena Mexico on March 7, teaming up with **Lady Frost** in the CMLL Women's tag championship tournament.

Elsewhere in Mexico, AAA revealed the ace up its sleeve, as, after months of rumors and uncertainty, the Mexican promotion finally announced the signing of one of the hottest luchadores in the world, **El Hijo de Dr. Wagner Jr.** The third-generation luchador was reportedly wanted in the United States by WWE, and Pro-Wrestling NOAH in Japan also reportedly wanted to keep him. But ultimately, the son of the great **Dr. Wagner Jr.** will call AAA home for the foreseeable future.

On the same night as the Hijo de Dr. Wagner Jr. announcement, AAA also revealed at a press conference that the yearly mega-event, Triplemania, will return to the one-night format, after being held across three different nights in three different cities for the past three years. This time around, it sounds like AAA is truly going all out for its anniversary show. **Mustafa Ali** has been confirmed to wrestle on the card, and owner **Dorian Roldan** will put his hair on the line against **Latin Lover's** hair, in a match where both men will choose a luchador to represent them—very much like **Vince McMahon** and **Donald Trump** did 18 years ago at WrestleMania 23.

The legendary **Hijo Del Santo** continues wrestling all over the country with his retirement tour, which, sadly, has been drawing fewer and fewer people since it kicked off last September. A recent event on this retirement tour unfortunately gained national notoriety because of its low attendance—and because the local luchador **Misterius** sadly suffered a scary injury when he landed on his head while attempting a Spanish Fly. While Misterius was able to walk to the back by himself, he was in a delicate state, reportedly suffering a grade 2 sprain on his neck as his sixth and seventh vertebrae were compressed.

1 Called Manders bags the coveted wXw 16 Carat Gold trophy. The native Iowan joins a prestigious list of top grapplers to have won the annual German wrestling tourney.
PHOTO BY SOPHIA FERGUSON/wXw

THE ECSTASY OF GOLD

In recent months, we have seen grapplers in search of gold all across Europe. On March 9, one of them struck big.

GREETINGS, GRAPPLE FANS. And welcome to another edition of "The Irish Whip," the column that brings you all the dropkicks and dispatches from European wrestling.

1 Called Manders is your 2025 16 Carat Gold winner. The Iowa native won the prestigious wXw tournament in Oberhausen, Germany, on March 9 after defeating **Daisuke Sekimoto**, **Leon Slater**, and **Masha Slamovich** en route to a gripping victory in the final over local star **Ahura**. Manders now joins the ranks of previous winners including **Gunther**, **Sami Zayn**, **Zack Sabre Jr.**, and **Ilja Dragunov**. That's quite the accomplishment.

Manders has built a solid reputation through his appearances in Europe over the last two years. Independent wrestling fans would be wise to get out and see him while they can. A major U.S.-based company may come calling before much longer.

PWI was on hand for Over The Top Wrestling's Aftermath show on February 2, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The evening saw a partial reunion of NXT's Sanity, as **Eric Young** teamed with **Axel Tischer (Alexander Wolfe)** to challenge **The Social Elite** for the OTT tag team straps. The main event contest saw much outside interference on behalf of TSE, which enabled them to pick up the win. Post-match, OTT heavyweight champ—and former Sanity member—**Big Damo (Killian Dain)** helped Young and Tischer fight off their opposition and send the fans in Belfast home happy. Elsewhere on the show, **PCO** teamed with **Scotty 2 Hotty** and Irish oddball **The Sem** to claim a trios victory. The subsequent celebratory dance was a sight to behold.

Across the sea in Scotland, **Rhio** was the 2025 winner of Insane Championship Wrestling's Square Go! contest. The match concept, which is a battle royal akin to WWE's Royal Rumble, awards the winner a briefcase that they can cash in for a future title shot at a time of their choosing. Rhio is the first woman to win the intergender matchup. The former ICW Women's champion might fancy setting her sights on ICW heavyweight gold this time around.

In other notable happenings from Square Go!: **Kenny Williams** retained the ICW heavyweight title against **Rampage Brown**, while **Landon Riley** held onto the Zero-G championship by beating **Daz Black** in a fast-paced encounter. Riley would go on to lose the championship to **Lewis Girvan** at ICW's Bad Habits show on March 2.

PROGRESS Wrestling staged two well-received shows in February. The Valentine's Day-themed PROGRESS Chapter 176 show, dubbed "For The Love Of PROGRESS," saw **Simon Miller** retain his Proteus championship in a heated win over **Charles Crowley** in the main event. On the stacked PROGRESS Chapter 177: My Own Destiny show, PROGRESS heavyweight champion **Luke Jacobs** bested **Tate Mayfairs**, and joshi legend **Meiko Satomura** defeated Rhio in the main event.

The star of that night, however, may have been **Rayne Leverkusen**. "The Maiden Of Metal" won a grueling four-way match and then immediately faced off with a fresh **Nina Samuels** for the PROGRESS Women's title. An exhausted Leverkusen came up just short, but a statement was made.

Bits & bobs: As we went to press, **Mercedes Mone** was set to appear at RevPro's High Stakes event on April 20, with **Kanji** as her announced opponent. Although the AEW star holds the RevPro Women's championship, this is still quite a get for the English company ... BODYSLAM! Women's champ **Aliss Ink** retained her title in a brutal steel cage match with **Emersyn Jayne** in Copenhagen, Denmark, on February 8. On the same night, Sanity men Big Damo & Axel Tischer won the BODYSLAM! tag straps ... wXw crowned new Shotgun and tag team champions in March, with **Joseph French Jr.** and **Big Bucks** lifting the respective gold.

That's it from me for this edition. Have a good time ... till next time.

BY PAT LAPRADE

Cassie Lee poses with IIconics/IInspiration teammate Jessie McKay at last November's "Big Event" convention in New York City. PHOTO BY GEORGE TAHINOS

BIG SHOWS IN ONTARIO

Along with WWE's Elimination Chamber, The Heartland Province played host to events from Smash Wrestling, Greektown Wrestling, and Maple Leaf Pro.

TORONTO WAS PRO WRESTLING'S center stage recently, with WWE coming to town for a *Smackdown* taping at Scotiabank Arena and Elimination Chamber at Rogers Centre.

Well, located in between those two venues, across the street from where **John Cena** made his now-famous heel turn, is the Toronto Rec Room. And on the afternoon before Elimination Chamber, Smash Wrestling presented a jam-packed show, featuring some of the best indie talents.

One of them was **Cassie Lee**, formerly WWE's **Peyton Royce**. It was Lee's first match since October 2023, following the birth of her second child with her husband, Ontario native **Shawn Spears**.

At the Rec Room, Lee defeated **Alexia Nicole**. After her win, she challenged **Jody Threat** for the Smash Women's title. The title match was supposed to happen on April 20, but the promotion has since announced that because of unforeseen circumstances, Lee couldn't appear anymore. Smash also announced that **Leyla Hirsch** would replace Lee against Threat on that show.

Still in Toronto, Greektown Wrestling had a stacked show on March 15 for its first event of 2025, with the likes of **Allysin Kay**, **Gangrel**, and, in the main event, **Ultimo Dragon**.

Maple Leaf Pro Wrestling held its second set of shows on March 14 and 15 in Windsor. **The Jet Setters** (**Kevin Knight** & **KUSHIDA**) defeated **The Kingdom** (**Matt Taven** & **Mike Bennett**) in one of the two main events. The other main event saw NWA World heavyweight champion **Thom Latimer** beat **Bishop Dyer**, the former **Baron Corbin**. **Josh Alexander** also made an appearance.

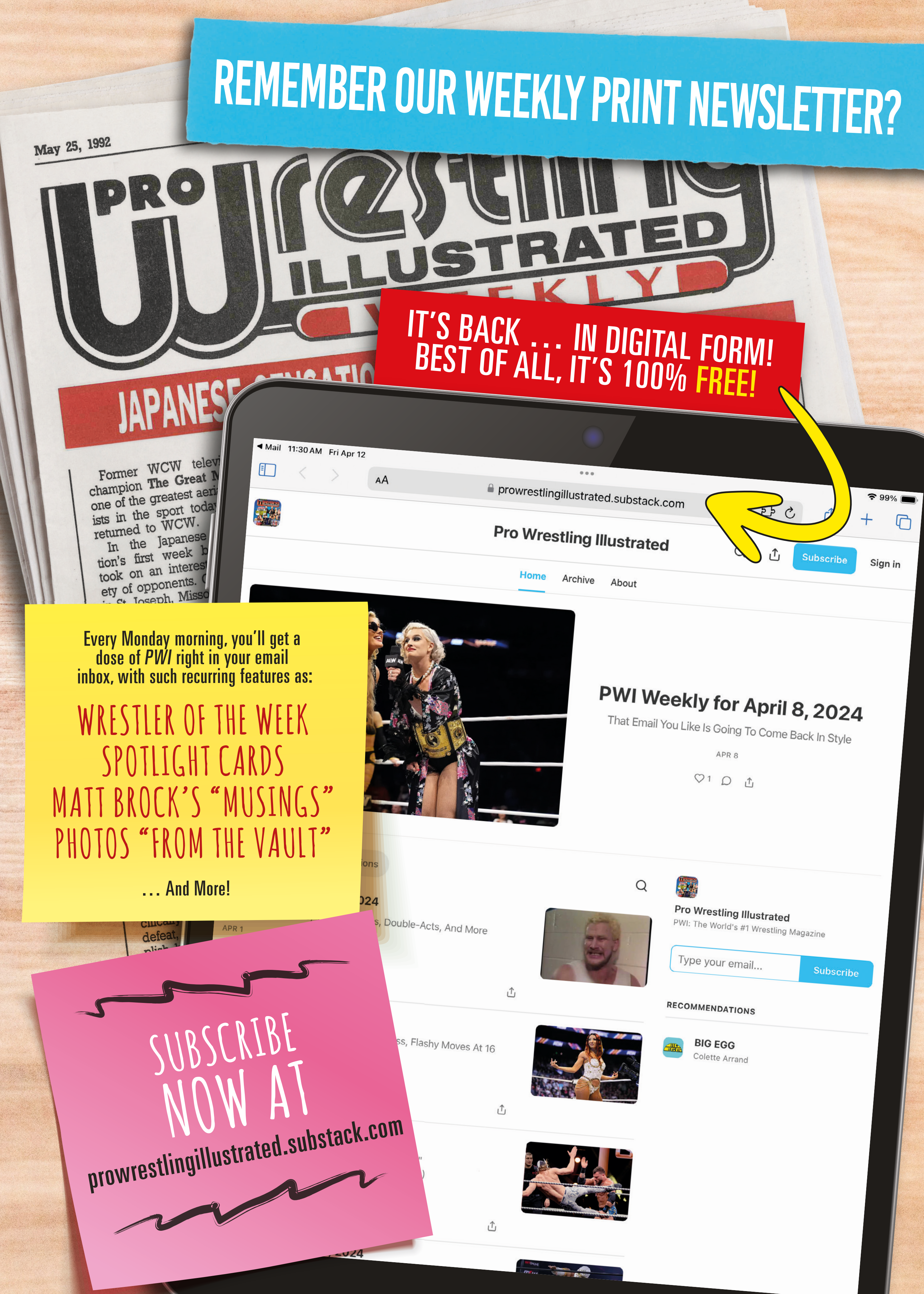
There has also been a lot of action in the province of Quebec, especially on three consecutive nights in March. Sans Restriction Chrono held a show in Cowansville on March 6 with some pretty big names. TNA X division champion **Moose** faced **Marko Estrada**; **Sidney Akeem**, formerly known as **Reggie** in WWE, made it to the final of the SRC tournament, losing to **Mononc St-Jacques**; and **Benjamin Tull** won the SRC Heritage title in a three-way dance against defending champion **Kevin Blanchard** and **Donovan Dijak**.

On March 7 in Montreal, in front of IWS's biggest crowd to date at the Olympia, veteran **Sexxxy Eddy** and his partner **Bob Anger** became tag team champions in a four-way ladder match. Also, young prospect **Dante Dubois** ended the 580-day reign of **Matt Viviani** as IWS Canadian champion.

And finally, on March 8, AWE and NSPW had a joint show in Chicoutimi. One of the matches people were raving about was AEW's **Megan Bayne** against former AWE champion **Kacey Diamond**. Bayne got the victory.

Out West, **Chad Daniels** became the new CWE champion by defeating **MENTALLO** in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Former WWE tag team champion **Rene Dupree** also completed a tour with the company in February.

Love Pro Wrestling staged its inaugural show in Calgary, Alberta, on March 7. It was a very successful first time for the promotion that usually runs in Edmonton. Among other bouts, former Heart of SHIMMER champion **Hyan** made her Canadian debut in a losing effort against **Taryn From Accounting**.



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champion The Great M
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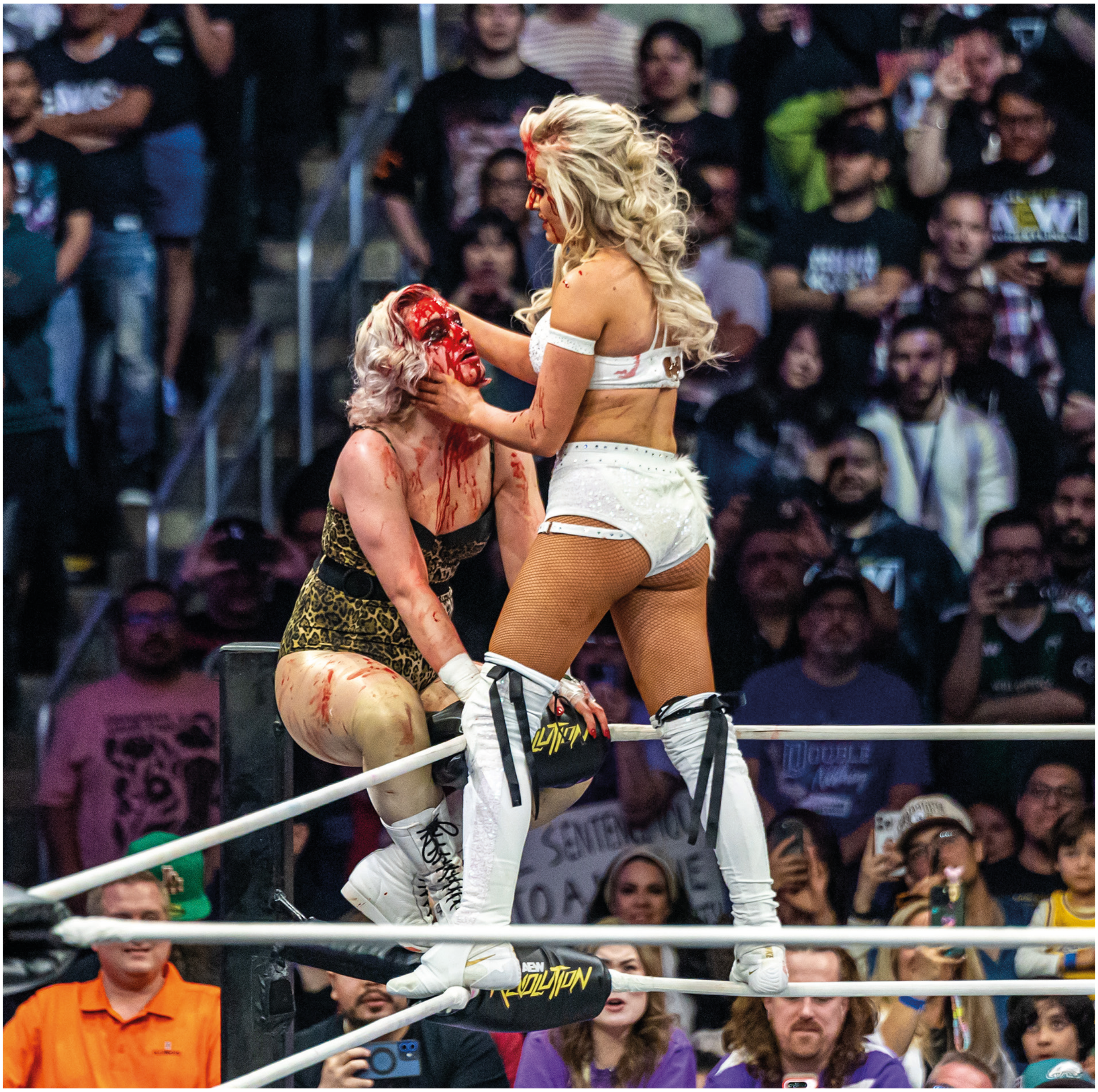


MARIAH MAY taunts her former mentor, Toni Storm, during the "Hollywood Ending" match at AEW Revolution.

Photo by **DOMINIQUE DINH**

From local independents to the largest stages, here's the latest roundup of live event results. Got a report you'd like to share? Send to pwiresults@yahoo.com (and please do your best to mirror the format used here).

SPOTLIGHT CARD OF THE MONTH

CALIFORNIA

LOS ANGELES—AEW Revolution at the Crypto.com Arena: **Hologram** & **Komander** defeated **Blake Christian** & **Lee Johnson** ... **Daniel Garcia, Adam Cole, Kyle O'Reilly,** & **Roderick Strong** beat **Carlie Bravo, Lee Moriarty, Shane Taylor,** & **Shawn Dean** ... **"Big Boom" AJ, Mark Briscoe,** & **Orange Cassidy** defeated **Johnny TV, Mansoor,** & **Mason Madden** ... **Adam Page** pinned **MJF** ... TBS champion **Mercedes Mone** defeated **Momo Watanabe** by submission to retain ... **Swerve Strickland** pinned **Ricochet**......**Continental champion Kazuchika Okada** pinned **Brody King** to retain ... World tag team champions **Bobby Lashley** & **Shelton Benjamin** defeated **Truth Magnum** & **Turbo Floyd** to retain ... Women's World champion **Toni Storm** pinned **Mariah May** in a "Hollywood Ending" match to retain ... **Kenny Omega** pinned International champion **Konosuke Takeshita** to win the title ... **Will Ospreay** beat **Kyle Fletcher** in a steel cage match ... World champion **Jon Moxley** defeated **Adam Copeland** and **Christian Cage** in a triple-threat to retain.
(03-09-25)

—Spotlight photos by Dominique Dinh

Toni Storm, barely able to see past her own bloody visage, gives a receipt to former friend Mariah May.

ALABAMA

FLORENCE—New South Pro Wrestling at Singin' River Brewing Company: **Donnie Primetime** defeated **Jake Franklin** ... **Kaitlyn Marie** beat **Ravenna Vein** ... **Rita Raccoon** defeated **Leah Night** ... **Chris Crunk** defeated **Shean Christopher** ... **Brandon Williams** beat **Bubba Batz, Byron Young, Harrison Haze, Saraya Saber, Trever Aeon,** and **Wolfman Weaver** in a Flo-town scramble ... **Samuel Handsome** & **Tyler Stevens** beat **Kent Havoc** & **Tyler Franks** ... **Jamesen Shook** defeated **Marcus Dylan** in an unsanctioned match.
(02-28-25)
—Matt Brock

CALIFORNIA

OAKLAND—HOODSLAM at Continental Club: **Vipress** defeated **Mighty Mayra, Ricky Stoner,** & **KEITA** in a fatal four-way ... **DARK Sheik** defeated **Marco Mayur** ... **Scotty Stoner** & **Richard Shhhnary** beat **Dave Wreckoning** & **Jeckles The Jester** ... Golden Gig champion **Cereal Man** defeated **EMO Rob Hands** to retain ... **MYLO** defeated **El Chupacabra** to retain the GLAMpionship ... **D-Torch** & **Lara Frazier** beat **Von Eerie** & **Juice Lee** ... **James C** defeated **Kenny K** in a best-of-three-falls match to win the Best Athlete in the East Bay Double Golden Fannypacks championship.
(03-07-25)
—Jane Doe

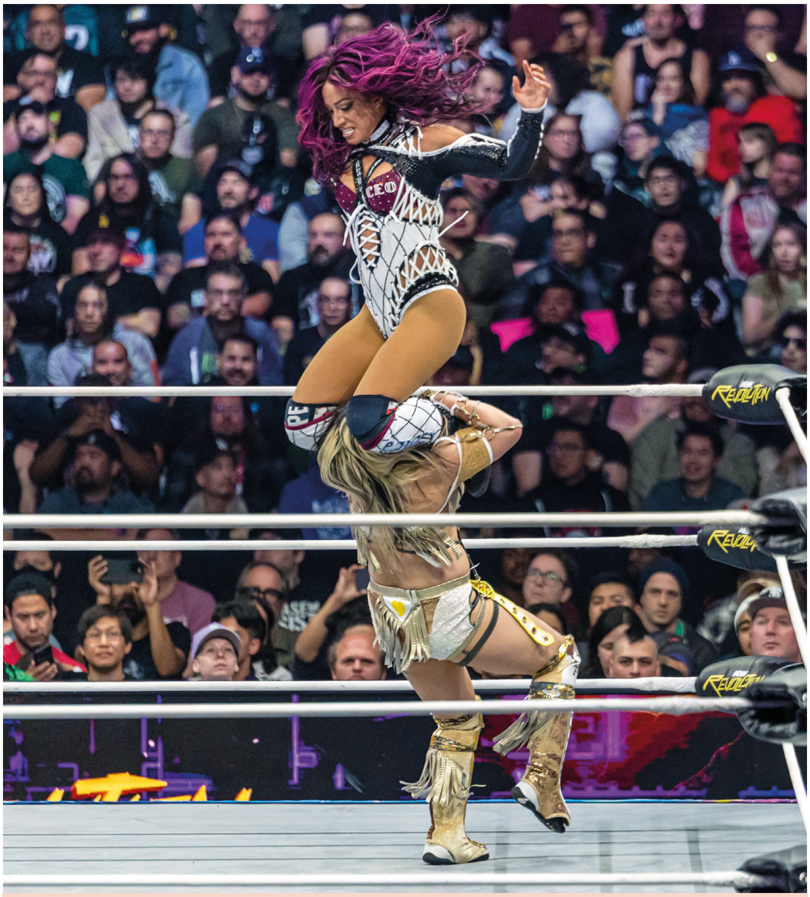
GEORGIA

BAINBRIDGE—Georgia Old School Championship Wrestling at Skate Towne: **Dungeon Master** beat **Luke Lawson** by DQ ... **Chris Spyder** pinned **Michael Enfinger** ... **Buzzsaw Benelli** pinned **Eddie Honcho** ... **Danny Stratos** pinned **Bill Weaver** ... **Nadia White** defeated **Vyra Lestrange** by submission ... **The Jeckle Brothers** pinned **The Law Dogs**.
(03-15-25)
—Randall Raker

ILLINOIS

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS—2econd Wrestling at Home Bar: **Ezio Orlandi** pinned **Koda Hernandaz** ... **Devon Monroe** & **Rabbi Fine** defeated **Darin Corbin** & **Matt Honey** ... **Shelly Benson** beat **Kaia McKenna** ... **Akira Gonzalez X** & **Axel Rico** defeated **Jay Martsen** & **Shain Boucher** ... **Sean Logan** pinned **Solomon Tupu** ... **Maggie Lee** beat **Vertvixen** ... **Jack Cartwheel** defeated **GAL** in a WWE ID Showcase Match.
(03-09-25)
—2econd Wrestling

BERWYN—AAW Wrestling at the Berwyn Eagles Club: **Solomon Tupu**



Mercedes Mone lands a Meteora on TBS title challenger Momo Watanabe.

MASSACHUSETTS

CAMBRIDGE—ICW No Holds Barred #69 at Sonia: **Malcolm Monroe III** & **Tommy Vendetta** defeated **Jaylen Brandyn** & **Traevon Jordan** ... **Tank** pinned **Little Mean Kathleen** ... **Danny Demanto** pinned **JT Dunn** ... **Nathan Mowery** pinned **Alex Stretch** ... **Matt Tremont** defeated **Kaplan** and **SLADE** in a triple-threat ... **Krule** & **Bobby Beverly** defeated **Atticus** & **Otis Cogar**.

(03-01-25)

—Leonard Brand

MICHIGAN

LANSING—Capital Pro Wrestling at The Fledge: **Dylan Derringer** & **Big Buford** defeated **24K** & **TJK** by DQ ... **Donte Casson** & **Jason Blasen** beat **Chris Malvado** & **Ominous Ramirez** by DQ ... **Shalwin** pinned **Cory Lyon** ... **Big Jorge** pinned **Conrad Loucks** ... **JP Ono** pinned **Mondo Real** ... **Max Morrison** pinned **Gary The Freak** to win the Great Lakes Television title ... Tag team champions **Don Tone Leone** & **Jay Leo** defeated **Billy Ray Daniels** & **Kipp Rude** to retain ... **Anderson Knight** pinned **Duality** ... **Sean Tyler** pinned **Darling Roger** ... **Georg Mack** defeated **Shain Boucher** and **Anthony Catena** in a three-way bout ... **BEEF** wrestled **Stallion Rogers** to a no-contest ... **Zeeko** pinned **Ethan Hyre** ... Women's champion **Maggie Lee** pinned **Tootie Lynn** to retain ... Tag team champions **Russ Jones** & **Schaff** defeated **KJ Reynolds** & **Ryan Matthias**, **Aaron Roberts** & **Harley Rock**, and **Damien Chambers** & **Crash Jaxon** in a four-way bout to retain ... **Rafael Quintero** defeated **Ace Perry** in a Mexican Death Match ... **Robert Anthony** pinned **Joe Alonzo** to win the Heritage title ... **Bruss Hamilton** & **Sean Logan** defeated **Mike Bennett** & **Hartenbower** ... **Isaiah Moore** pinned **Silas Young** ... **Davey Vega** & **Shazza McKenzie** defeated **Joey Avalon** & **Sierra** ... Heavyweight champion **Ren Jones** pinned **Trevor Lee** to retain.

(02-28-25)

—Leonard Brand

It's a sight to behold as Will Ospreay and Kyle Fletcher stare holes through one another atop the steel cage.

defeated **Modern Day Shaman** by countout.

(03-16-25)
—Leonard Brand

OHIO

TOLEDO—Championship International Wrestling at St. Clement Hall: **Dustin Devine** & **Rey Demonyo** defeated **Steven Chavis** & **K-No** ... **Andre Stray** pinned **Sherman Walker** ... **Stephie Mac** defeated **Pepper Pryde** by submission ... **LJ Lawrence** fought **Perry Mast** to a double-DQ ... Tag team champions **The Saint Bros** wrestled **Sean Evans** & **Eddie Dylan** and **Calvin Coco** & **Josh Morris** to a no-contest ... **Landen Monahan** pinned **The Great Akuma** ... National champion **War Ready Maleko** pinned **Malice** to retain ... **Ashton Adonis** pinned **Kenny Urban** ... Heavyweight champion **Freedom Ramsey** pinned **Brandon Day** to retain.

(03-16-25)
—Leonard Brand

NEW MEXICO

ALBUQUERQUE—NWA New Mexico (Duke City Championship Wrestling): **MAGA Chuey** defeated **Enrique Calderon** ... **Valak Vile** beat

Faced with a top-tier opponent in Kazuchika Okada, the massive and powerful Brody King dives like a cruiserweight through the ropes.

Adam Copeland lands a spear on Jon Moxley during the Revolution main event, but it won't be enough to take home the AEW World championship.

The thrilling International title bout between Konosuke Takeshita and Kenny Omega was one of three matches that evening—alongside Storm vs. May and Ospreay vs. Fletcher—to earn the coveted five-star rating from Dave Meltzer in *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*.

RJ Wylde ... **Ricky Rebel** defeated **Sale** by DQ ... DCCW Route 66 champion **Bryan Idol** defeated **The Bounty Hunter** and **Thunder** in a three-way bout to retain ... **Charlie 50** beat **Jastin Taylor** ... DCCW tag team champions **Tommy Test** & **Turbo Tony** beat **CLAS** & **Devin Reno** to retain ... **Mister Happy** defeated **Ronin** ... **Hobo Hank** & **Natalia Markova** beat **Jaden Monroe** & **Zamaya**.

(02-22-25)
—Fred Slow

TEXAS

BIG SANDY—Micro Wrestling Federation at Circle M Crawfish: **Rufio** defeated **Lil' Show** ... **Chief Littlefoot** pinned **Disco Dom** ... **Zach Presley** beat **The Carolina Reaper** ... **Mr. Nice Guy** defeated **Lumberjack** to win the Micro Wrestling title.

(03-11-25)
—Matthew Irvine

VERMONT

BARRE—Green Mountain Wrestling at Barre Elks Lodge #1535: **Mullet Man** & **Jobz** defeated **Blade Bandit** & **Dylan Nix** by DQ ... **Owen Brody** defeated **Tom LaRosa**, **Brody Jackson**, **David Coles**, **Ash Bennett**, and **Corey Jackson** in a six-way scramble ... **Gabriel Skye** pinned **Don Freeze** ... **Ryan Mooney** pinned **Juni Underwood** ... **Joe Krule** & **Abed Arroniz** defeated **Ryan Ryzz** & **Miles Penn** ... **Mike Skyros** beat **Athan Promise** by submission ... **Jesse Nolan** pinned **Zenith** ... **Johnny Pierce** pinned Mullet Man in a streetfight.

(03-16-25)
—Adam Lash

WEST VIRGINIA

KEYSER—Elite Pro Wrestling Alliance at the Indie on Main Theatre: **Danny Grandview** pinned **Cizzko** ... **Andrew Stevens** defeated **DB Rivera** ... **JJ Grizzly** defeated **Dallas Riggs** ... Elite Pro Hybrid champion **Gavin Miller** beat **Brandon Scott** to retain ... **Ryan Lee** won an over-the-top-rope battle royal, last eliminating **KP McGregor** ... Elite Pro heavyweight champion **Shane Malice** defeated **Kylo Cain** to retain.

(03-13-25)
—Tim Walker

CANADA

ONTARIO

WINDSOR—Maple Leaf Pro Wrestling at St. Clair College: **QT Marshall**, **Blake Christian**, & **Sheldon Jean** defeated **Bhupinder Gujjar**, **El Reverso**, & **Psycho Mike** ... **Kylie Rae** pinned **Taylor Rising** ... **Alex Zayne** defeated **Taiji Ishimori**, **Kaito Kiyomiya**, and **Stu Grayson** in a four-way bout ... **Gisele Shaw** pinned **Serena Deeb** ... **PCO** pinned **Michael Allen Richard Clark** ... **Bishop Dyer** & **Billy Gunn** defeated **Thom Latimer** & **Matt Cardona** ... PWA Grail champion **Rohan Raja** pinned **Rich Swann** to retain ... **KUSHIDA** & **Kevin Knight** defeated **Matt Taven** & **Mike Bennett**.

(03-15-25)
—Leonard Brand

BY BRIAN R. SOLOMON

FLAIR VS. STEAMBOAT

PWI's resident historian looks back on one of pro wrestling's finest in-ring rivalries.

Ricky Steamboat and Ric Flair gave wrestling fans one of the sport's all-time greatest matches at the Chi-Town Rumble event. To this day, the trilogy of televised bouts between the two stands as one of wrestling's finest. PHOTO BY TIRPAK

PAINTING HAS THE *MONA* *Lisa*. Music has Beethoven's Ninth. Literature has *Hamlet*..

And professional wrestling has Ric Flair vs. Ricky Steamboat.

For an entire generation of fans, the wars between these two—particularly that glorious trilogy in early-1989 over the NWA World heavyweight title—stand as the high watermark for what can be achieved in this unique form of human endeavor and storytelling. At Chi-Town Rumble, *Clash of the Champions VI*, and WrestleWar '89, they painted three masterpieces across a 20-by-20-foot canvas. At a time when wrestling was leaning into the cartoonish, prizing sizzle over steak, Flair and Steamboat reminded us what the heart and soul of this great sport was about.

They'd met in the ring many times before, first crossing paths in the late-1970s in Jim Crockett Promotions, two young lions pointing the way to the decade to come. They initially did battle over lesser titles—the Mid-Atlantic TV championship, and the United States championship they traded back and forth on three occasions. In fact, those who were there, including Flair and Steamboat themselves, will tell you that those matches—contested at live events throughout the Mid-Atlantic with no TV cameras present—constituted the best work of their careers. Alas, we can never really know.

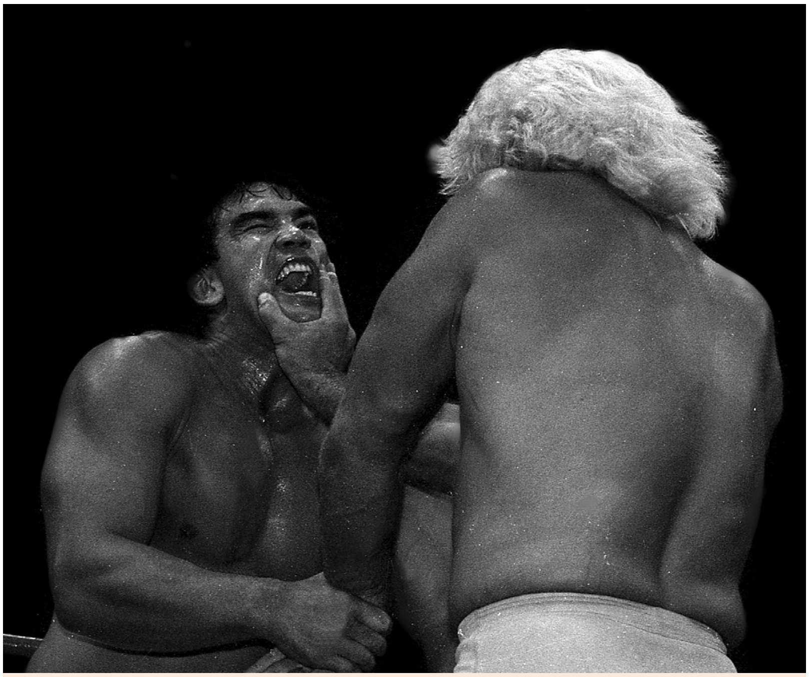
They'd met in several bouts for the NWA World title before, during Flair's first few reigns in the early-1980s. The most well-known of these took place before 13,000 fans at New Jersey's Meadowlands Arena. But then, Steamboat departed for the WWF in early-1985 and became "The Dragon." The two wouldn't meet again for four years, carving out separate destinies in the chaotic landscape of the 1980s promotional wars.

Steamboat came roaring back to the NWA at the start of 1989, just after JCP had been sold to Ted Turner and was transforming into WCW. A bigger superstar than ever thanks to his wars with the likes of Jake Roberts and Randy Savage up north, Steamboat was placed directly in the path of Flair, then in his fifth reign as NWA World champion. Their feud helped to define the nascent WCW in its first banner year. Steamboat debuted in the WTBS studios in Atlanta, making an instant splash as he teamed with Eddie Gilbert to shellack a stunned Flair and Barry Windham in a televised match. The war was on.

It was a collision of philosophies. Flair was the flamboyant playboy champion, dripping with gold and women, flaunting his superiority; Steamboat the humble family man, wife and son always at his side, seeking only the glory of honest victory. One month after Steamboat's return, on February 20, 1989, he challenged Flair for the NWA World title in the main event of Chi-Town Rumble at the UIC Pavilion in Chicago. The challenger brought a flurry of action, putting the champion on the defensive from the outset. After 23 minutes and 15 seconds of furious combat, an exhausted Flair attempted the figure-four leglock, but got caught in an inside cradle. Three seconds later, Ricky Steamboat was the new heavyweight champion of the world.

Fans and insiders were stunned—not just at the outcome, but also at the show that these two masters of ring psychology had put on. On the grandest stage they'd ever shared, before a pay-per-view audience, they provided an exciting alternative to the very different WWF—where the Mega Powers were exploding at the time, and style took decided precedence over substance.

The family-man challenger was now the NWA World champion. Most recall that Flair got his televised rematch six weeks later, on April 2, at the Louisiana Superdome. The defense took place during the *Clash of the Champions VI* broadcast on TBS. But along the way, Steamboat would also have a title defense in Japan against Mitsuharu Misawa, as well as a series of pitched house show rematches with Flair: at the Atlanta Omni, the Philadelphia Civic Center, Maryland's Capital Centre, the Dorton Arena in Raleigh, the Ohio Expo Center, Chattanooga's UTC Arena, and the Baltimore Arena.



By the time WrestleWar '89 rolled around, the fans had begun to back the antagonistic Flair, making his sixth World title victory a moment to celebrate. PHOTO BY BILL APTER

The *Clash* rematch, a two-out-of-three falls affair held the same day as WrestleMania V, 1,300 miles away in Atlantic City, proved their Chi-Town Rumble encounter was only a warm-up. With legendary former NWA World champions Lou Thesz, Pat O'Connor, Buddy Rogers, Gene Kiniski, Harley Race, and Terry & Dory Funk present, Flair and Steamboat tore the house down. Flair nabbed the first fall with an inside cradle at 19:35. Steamboat scored a rare submission over Flair with a double chicken-wing at 35:01. And with less than five minutes left, Steamboat achieved the controversial deciding pinfall at 55:32, with Flair's foot under the ropes, unbeknownst to referee Tommy Young.

A decisive winner had yet to be determined. The third match was made for WrestleWar '89: Music City Showdown on May 7 at the Nashville Municipal Auditorium. During the subsequent five weeks, Steamboat took challenges from Mike Rotunda in Florida and the Iron Sheik in Philly, as well as four more untelevised dust-ups with Flair at the New Haven Coliseum, Mid-South Coliseum, Kiel Auditorium, and Civic Center in Huntington, Virginia.

Flair and Steamboat had grown quite accustomed to one another by that point. And when they met for the last time in Nashville, they knew each other's every move. The result was arguably the finest match of the trilogy. Unfortunately, during his eleven weeks as champion, Steamboat's wholesome image had worn thin with fans, who'd gradually migrated to the side of the flashier, braggadocious Nature Boy. The Steamboat experiment would not be a long-term one, and it was to the exultation of fans that Flair defeated Steamboat that night in 31 minutes and 37 seconds, becoming a six-time NWA World champion.

Sitting ringside as judges for the match were Thesz, O'Connor, and Terry Funk, and it was Funk who unceremoniously jumped Flair during his post-match interview with Jim Ross, setting off WCW's next white-hot world title feud. Just like that, the Steamboat feud was swept aside. After all, that's the nature of wrestling—the show keeps on moving, and fans must be brought back for the next big thing.

But despite wrestling's ever-onward march, those incredible three matches from 1989 made time stop. They live on in the imagination of fans, and are brought up whenever people talk about the greatest matches of all-time. More than just moves, more than even athleticism, professional wrestling is high drama played out between three ropes; a story told as only two individuals locked in performative combat can tell it. And on those three nights 36 years ago, Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat showed definitively how it's done.

FOR PERIOD ENDED MARCH 16, 2025

The top singles wrestlers, tag teams, and more are ranked and dissected.

HEAVYWEIGHT

1 **HIROOKI GOTO**
(-) IWGP World champion
Mie, Japan

2 **GUNTHER**
(2) WWE World heavyweight champion
Vienna, Austria

3 **CODY RHODES**
(1) WWE Undisputed Universal champion
Atlanta, GA

4 **JON MOXLEY**
(4) AEW World champion
Cincinnati, OH

5 **JOE HENDRY**
(6) TNA World champion
Edinburgh, Scotland

6 **JOHN CENA**
(-) Men's Elimination Chamber winner
West Newbury, MA

7 **OZAWA**
(7) GHC heavyweight champion
Shizuoka, Japan

8 **LA KNIGHT**
(-) WWE United States champion
Las Vegas, NV

9 **OBA FEMI**
(-) NXT champion
Lagos, Nigeria

10 **CHRIS JERICHO**
(-) ROH World champion
Winnipeg, MB

WOMEN

1 **TONI STORM**
(-) AEW Women's World champion
Auckland, New Zealand

2 **TIFFANY STRATTON**
(2) WWE Women's champion
Prior Lake, MN

3 **IYO SKY**
(-) WWE Women's World champion
Kanagawa, Japan

4 **MASHA SLAMOVICH**
(4) TNA Knockouts World champion
Moscow, Russia

5 **SAYA KAMITANI**
(6) World of Stardom champion
Kanagawa, Japan

6 **BIANCA BELAIR**
(-) Women's Elimination Chamber winner
Knoxville, TN

7 **MERCEDES MONE**
(8) AEW TBS/NJPW STRONG/RevPro Women's champion
Boston, MA

8 **STEPHANIE VAQUER**
(-) NXT Women's/Women's North American champion
San Fernando, Chile

9 **RHEA RIPLEY**
(1) Former WWE Women's World champion
Adelaide, South Australia

10 **ATHENA**
(10) ROH Women's World champion
Dallas, TX

PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE DINH

TONI STORM

PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE DINH

JON MOXLEY

WWE RAW
MEN

Ⓒ **GUNTHER**
(C) Vienna, Austria

1–JEY USO
(1) San Francisco, CA
2–BRON BREAKKER
(2) Atlanta, GA
3–SETH ROLLINS
(5) Davenport, IA
4–PENTA
(4 Mexico City, Mexico
5–AJ STYLES
(-) Gainesville, GA

WWE RAW
WOMEN

Ⓒ **IYO SKY**
(3) Kanagawa, Japan

1– RHEA RIPLEY
(C) Adelaide, South Australia
2– BIANCA BELAIR
(-) Knoxville, TN
3–LYRA VALKYRIA
(1) Dublin, Ireland
4–DAKOTA KAI
(4) Auckland, New Zealand
5–LIV MORGAN
(2) Elmwood Park, NJ

SMACKDOWN
MEN

Ⓒ **CODY RHODES**
(C) Atlanta, GA

1–JOHN CENA
(-) West Newbury, MA
2–LA KNIGHT
(2) Las Vegas, NV
3–SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(1) Kyoto, Japan
4–CARMELO HAYES
(3) Worcester, MA
5–KEVIN OWENS
(5) Marieville, QC

SMACKDOWN
WOMEN

Ⓒ **TIFFANY STRATTON**
(C) Prior Lake, MN

1–CHELSEA GREEN
(1) Victoria, BC
2–CHARLOTTE FLAIR
(-) Charlotte, NC
3–MICHIN
(3) Los Angeles, CA
4–NAOMI
(4 Orlando, FL
5–NIA JAX
(2) San Diego, CA

AEW
MEN

Ⓒ **JON MOXLEY**
(C) Cincinnati, OH

1–KENNY OMEGA
(5) Winnipeg, MA
2–KAZUCHIKA OKADA
(2) Aichi, Japan
3–KONOSUKE TAKESHITA
(1) Osaka, Japan
4–WILL OSPREAY
(4) Essex, U.K.
5–SWERVE STRICKLAND
(-) Tacoma, WA

AEW
WOMEN

Ⓒ **TONI STORM**
(2) Auckland, New Zealand

1–MERCEDES MONE
(1) Boston, MA
2–MARIAH MAY
(C) London, U.K.
3–MEGAN BAYNE
(-) East Haven, CT
4–HARLEY CAMERON
(-) Gold Coast, Australia
5–JULIA HART
(3) Bloomington, MN

TNA
MEN

Ⓒ **JOE HENDRY**
(C) Edinburgh, Scotland

1–MOOSE
(1) Atlanta, GA
2–MUSTAFA ALI
(-) Chicago, IL
3–MIKE SANTANA
(3) New York, NY
4–STEVE MACLIN
(-) Rutherford, NJ
5–FRANKIE KAZARIAN
(5) Anaheim, CA

TNA
KNOCKOUTS

Ⓒ **MASHA SLAMOVICH**
(C) Moscow, Russia

1–TESSA BLANCHARD
(1) Charlotte, NC
2–CORA JADE
(3) Chicago, IL
3–SAVANNAH EVANS
(2) Charlotte, NC
4–LEI YING LEE
(-) Chongqing, China
5–XIA BROOKSIDE
(-) Liverpool, U.K.

NJPW

Ⓒ **HIROOKI GOTO**
(1) Mie, Japan

1–ZACK SABRE JR.
(C) Isle of Sheppey, U.K.
2–DAVID FINLAY
(-) Atlanta, GA
3–YOTA TSUJI
(2) Kanagawa, Japan
4–EL DESPERADO
(3) Niigata, Japan
5–SHOTA UMINO
(-) Tokyo, Japan

STARDOM

Ⓒ **SAYA KAMITANI**
(C) Kanagawa, Japan

1–STARLIGHT KID
(1) Kanagawa, Japan
2–SAYAKA KURARA
(-) Aichi, Japan
3–MAYU IWATANI
(3) Yamaguchi, Japan
4–MOMO WATANABE
(5) Kanagawa, Japan
5–HANAN
(-) Tochigi, Japan

Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Jason McVeigh, Kristen Ashly, Harry Burkett, Paul Pratt, and STRIGGA (Cagematch.net, Purolove.com). The numbers in parentheses indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue.

TAG TEAM

1 **THE HARDYS**
Jeff & Matt Hardy
(2) TNA World tag team champions

2 **THE HURT SYNDICATE**
Bobby Lashley & Shelton Benjamin
(5) AEW World tag team champions

3 **WAR RAIDERS**
Erik & Ivar
(-) WWE World tag team champions

4 **FRAXIOM**
Axiom & Nathan Frazer
(4) NXT tag team champions

5 **LOS HERMANOS CHAVEZ**
Angel de Oro & Niebla Roja
(8) CMLL tag team champions

6 **THE STREET PROFITS**
Angelo Dawkins & Montez Ford
(-) WWE tag team champions

7 **LOS INGOBERNABLES DE JAPON**
Hiromu Takahashi & Tetsuya Naito
(-) IWGP tag team champions

8 **THE JUDGMENT DAY**
Liv Morgan & Raquel Rodriguez
(-) WWE Women's tag team champions

9 **STARS**
Hanan & Saya Iida
(9) Stardom tag team champions

10 **DIY**
Johnny Gargano & Tommaso Ciampa
(1) Former WWE tag team champions

PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

CODY RHODES

MOST POPULAR

1–CODY RHODES
2–TONI STORM
3–JEY USO
4–THE HARDYS
5–CM PUNK
6–JOE HENDRY
7–SWERVE STRICKLAND
8–LA KNIGHT
9–WILL OSPREAY
10–RHEA RIPLEY

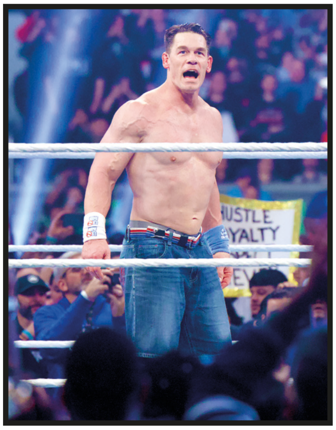


PHOTO BY STEVE ARGINTARU

JOHN CENA

MOST HATED

1–JOHN CENA
2–DOMINIK MYSTERIO
3–CHRIS JERICHO
4–TESSA BLANCHARD
5–MJF
6–KEVIN OWENS
7–THE DEATH RIDERS
8–LIV MORGAN
9–OZAWA
10–MERCEDES MONE

MLW
MEN

Ⓒ MATT RIDDLE
(C) Las Vegas, NV

1–MADS KRUGGER
(3) Unknown
2–DONOVAN DIJAK
(3) Worcester, MA
3–SATOSHI KOJIMA
(2) Tokyo, Japan
4–TOM LAWLOR
(5) Las Vegas, NV
5–KUSHIDA
(-) Tokyo, Japan

NWA
MEN

Ⓒ THOM LATIMER
(C) Chesterfield, U.K.

1–CARSON BARTHOLOMEW DRAKE
(1) Cincinnati, OH
2–SILAS MASON
(4) Blount County, TN
3–ALEX TAYLOR
(2) Gallatin, TX
4–MIMS
(3) Clarksville, TN
5–COLBY CORINO
(-) Philadelphia, PA

NXT
MEN

Ⓒ OBA FEMI
(C) Lagos, Nigeria

1–SHAWN SPEARS
(-) St. Catharines, ON
2–TONY D'ANGELO
(1) Chicago, IL
3–LEXIS KING
(3) Cincinnati, OH
4–JE'VON EVANS
(-) Greensboro, NC
5–ETHAN PAGE
(5) Hamilton, ON

ROH
MEN

Ⓒ CHRIS JERICHO
(C) Winnipeg, MB

1–KOMANDER
(1) Reynosa, Mexico
2–LEE MORIARTY
(3) Pittsburgh, PA
3– KATSUYORI SHIBATA
(5) Mie, Japan
4–LEE JOHNSON
(3) Gary, IN
5–BRIAN CAGE
(4) Chico, CA

AAA
MEN

Ⓒ ALBERTO EL PATRON
(C) San Luis Potosi, Mexico

1–LAREDO KID
(2) Nuevo Laredo, Mexico
2–EL MESIAS
(1) Bayamon, PR
3–PSYCHO CLOWN
(3) Mexico City, Mexico
4–PAGANO
(-) Juarez, Mexico
5–NINO HAMBURGUESA
(-) Mexico

MLW
WOMEN

Ⓒ DELMI EXO
(C) Providence, RI

1–JANAI KAI
(1) Washington D.C.
2–PERSEPHONE
(2) El Paso, TX
3–LLUVIA
(3) Mexico City, Mexico
4–MILA MOORE
(-) West Islip, NY
5–ALEJANDRA QUINTANILLA
(5) San Salvador, El Salvador

NWA
WOMEN

Ⓒ KENZIE PAIGE
(C) Sevierville, TN

1–BIG MAMA
(1) Cincinnati, OH
2–HALEY J
(2) Unknown
3–TIFFANY NIEVES
(3) New York, NY
4–NATALIA MARKOVA
(4) Moscow, Russia
5–RUTHIE JAY
(5) Port-Au-Prince, Haiti

NXT
WOMEN

Ⓒ STEPHANIE VAQUER
(3) San Fernando, Chile

1–GIULIA
(C) London, U.K.
2–JORDYNNE GRACE
(-) Austin, TX
3–JAIDA PARKER
(-) Port St. Lucie, FL
4–LOLA VICE
(-) Miami, FL
5–KARMEN PETROVIC
(5) Toronto, ON

ROH
WOMEN

Ⓒ ATHENA
(C) Dallas, TX

1–RED VELVET
(1) Miami, FL
2–BILLIE STARKZ
(3) Louisville, KY
3–THUNDER ROSA
(-) Tijuana, Mexico
4–QUEEN AMINATA
(2) Guinea, West Africa
5–LEILA GREY
(4) New York, NY

AAA
WOMEN

Ⓒ FLAMMER
(C) Monterrey, Mexico

1–DALYS
(5) Panama City, Panama
2–SUSSY LOVE
(2) Villanueva, Mexico
3–LA HIEDRA
(1) Nuevo Laredo, Mexico
4–CHIK TORMENTA
(3) Guadalajara, Mexico
5–REINA DORADA
(5) Mexico City, Mexico

RATINGS ANALYSIS

"SPOTLIGHT ON JAPAN" was the theme of our May 2025 issue; and a snapshot of our ratings this month shows just how vibrant the Japanese scene is. **Hirooki Goto (#1)** leads our overall Heavyweight rankings this issue, outpacing some of the industry's most recognizable names. His position underscores the enduring importance of the IWGP World championship he won—and twice successfully defended—during our evaluation period. Elsewhere on the Heavyweight list, GHC heavyweight champion **OZAWA (#7)** continues to establish himself as the top dog in Pro Wrestling NOAH. The contrast between the veteran Goto and the young and upcoming OZAWA is one of the current hallmarks of the Japanese scene.

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HIROOKI GOTO SHAKES THE HAND OF YUJI NAGATA, HIS SECOND CHALLENGER FOR THE IWGP WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT BELT.

The women's divisions in Japan are equally dynamic right now. **Saya Kamitani (#5)** more than earned her high positioning on our Women's Top 10. The Stardom champion boasts a mix of exceptional athleticism and charisma—something that's also reflected in her colleagues, **Hanan & Saya Iida (#9)**, who hold onto their position on our Tag Team Top 10. Speaking of tag tag teams, IWGP tag team champions **Hiromu Takahashi & Tetsuya Naito (#7)** make our Tag Team list for the first time as a duo after winning the belts on February 11.

The consistent Japanese representation across the *PWI* Ratings indicates just how healthy and diverse the current wrestling ecosystem is there.

CMLL
MEN

Ⓒ **GRAN GUERRERO**
(C) Gomez Palacio, Mexico
1–MISTICO
(1) Mexico City, Mexico
2–HECHICERO
(-) Monterrey, Mexico
3–FLIP GORDON
(-) Kalispell, MT
4–GUERRERO MAYA JR.
(4) Atlixco, Mexico
5–STAR BLACK
(5) Guadalajara, Mexico

NOAH

Ⓒ **OZAWA**
(C) Shizuoka, Japan
1–MASA KITAMIYA
(-) Toyama, Japan
2–KENTA
(-) Saitama, Japan
3–EITA
(4) Nagano, Japan
4–MANABU SOYA
(5) Nagano, Japan
5–AMAKUSA
(-) Kumamoto, Japan

AJPW

Ⓒ **JUN SAITO**
(C) Miyagi, Japan
1–KENTO MIYAHARA
(-) Fukuoka, Japan
2–YUMA AOYAGI
(4) Nagano, Japan
3–MUSASHI
(3) Iwate, Japan
4–YUKO MIYAMOTO
(5) Hiroshima, Japan
5–SEIKI YOSHIOKA
(-) Kumamoto, Japan

INDEPENDENT

Ⓒ **MARCUS MATHERS**
(C) Philadelphia, PA
1–ATTICUS COGAR
(-) Cleveland, OH
2–CALVIN TANKMAN
(-) New Castle, IN
3–RYAN CLANCY
(5) New York
4–MAGGIE LEE
(-) Cedar Rapids, IA
5–CHANNING THOMAS
(-) Saugus, MA

PROGRESS
MEN

Ⓒ **LUKE JACOBS**
(C) Manchester, U.K.
1–MAN LIKE DEREISS
(3) Birmingham, U.K.
2–MICHAEL OKU
(4) London, U.K.
3–SIMON MILLER
(-) London, U.K.
4–LEON SLATER
(2) Bradford, U.K.
5–TATE MAYFAIRS
(1) Manchester, U.K.

CMLL
WOMEN

Ⓒ **ZEUXIS**
(C) San Juan, Puerto Rico
1–LLUVIA
(1) Mexico City, Mexico
2–PERSEPHONE
(2) El Paso, TX
3–DARK SILUETA
(3) Guadalajara, Mexico
4–LA CATALINA
(4) Santiago, Chile
5–INDIA SIOUX
(-) Nezahualcoyotl, Mexico

TJPW

Ⓒ **MIZUKI**
(C) Kobe, Japan
1–SUZUME
(1) Ibaraki, Japan
2–HYPER MISAO
(2) Ibaraki, Japan
3–SHOKO NAKAJIMA
(3) Niigata, Japan
4–RIKA TATSUMI
(5) Nagano, Japan
5–POM HARAJUKU
(-) Tokyo, Japan

MARIGOLD

Ⓒ **UTAMI HAYASHISHITA**
(C) Kagoshima, Japan
1–MAI SAKURAI
(1) Chiba, Japan
2–VICTORIA YUZUKI
(2) Aichi, Japan
3–MIRAI
(-) Iwate, Japan
4–BOZILLA
(4) Hanover, Germany
5– NANAE TAKAHASHI
(-) Saitama, Japan

PAN-AFRIKAN

Ⓒ **SUGE D**
(C) Augusta, GA
1–JORDAN BLADE
(1) Richmond, VA
2–PAPA JACE
(2) Las Vegas, NV
3–EEL O'NEAL
(3) Baltimore, MD
4–SHELTON BENJAMIN
(4) Orangeburg, SC
5–BILLY DIXON
(5) New York, NY

PROGRESS
WOMEN

Ⓒ **NINA SAMUELS**
(C) London, U.K.
1–RHIO
(1) Preston, U.K.
2–RAYNE LEVERKUSEN
(5) London, U.K.
3–SESSION MOTH MARTINA
(-) Dublin, Ireland
4–LANA AUSTIN
(4) Manchester, U.K.
5–ALEXXIS FALCON
(3) Hull, U.K.

JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT

1 **EL DESPERADO**
(1) IWGP junior heavyweight champion
Niigata, Japan

2 **MISTICO**
(8) MLW World middleweight champion
Mexico City, Mexico

3 **LAREDO KID**
(3) AAA cruiserweight champion
Nuevo Laredo, Mexico

4 **MUSASHI**
(4) AJPW junior heavyweight champion
Iwate, Japan

5 **EITA**
(5) GHC junior heavyweight champion
Nagano, Japan

6 **DRAGON LEE**
(6) WWE SPEED champion
Tala, Mexico

7 **YAMATO**
(7) Open the Brave Gate/Dream Gate champion
Iwate, Japan

8 **IKUTO HIDAKA**
(9) BJW junior heavyweight champion
Shimane, Japan

9 **WILL KAVEN**
(-) RevPro British cruiserweight champion
Portsmouth, U.K.

10 **LEWIS GIRVAN**
(-) ICW Zero-G champion
Renfrew, Scotland

WWE ID PROSPECTS

1–MARCUS MATHERS
2–ZARA ZAKHER
3–JACK CARTWHEEL
4–GAL
5–CAPPUCCINO JONES
6–SEAN LEGACY
7–KYLIE RAE
8–RICKY SMOKES
9–ZAYDA STEEL
10–AARON ROURKE

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SEAN LEGACY

WRESTLERS TO PORTRAY DOINK THE CLOWN

1–MATT BORNE
2–RAY APOLLO
3–STEVE LOMBARDI
4–STEVE KEIRN
5–NICK DINSMORE

—Sent by KLOWNS4EVER, via email

LUCHADOR MASKS

1–EL SANTO
2–MIL MASCARAS
3–BLUE DEMON
4–REY MYSTERIO JR.
5–LA PARKA
6–PSICOSIS
7–HALLOWEEN
8–THE BEAST MORTOS
9–PSYCHO CLOWN
10–ATLANTIS

—Sent by Johnny Heering, Danbury, CT

DRAGONGATE: CHAMPION–YAMATO; **1**-KZY; **2**-Shun Skywalker; **3**-Kota Minoura; **4**-Jacky Kamei; **5**-Hyo

DDT: CHAMPION–Chris Brookes; **1**-Yuya Koroku; **2**-Yuki Ueno; **3**-MAO; **4**-Danshoku Dieno; **5**-Takeshi Masada

MELBOURNE CITY WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Ricky South; **1**-Adam Brooks; **2**-Jarvis; **3**-Lucky O'Leary; **4**-Robbie Thorpe; **5**-Caveman Ugg

MAPLE LEAF PRO: CHAMPION–VACANT; **1**-Rohan Raja; **2**-PCO; **3**-Kaito Kiyomiya; **4**-Mike Bennett; **5**- Alex Zayne

REVOLUTION PRO WRESTLING: CHAMPION–Michael Oku; **1**-Will Kaven; **2**-1 Called Manders; **3**-JJ Gale.; **4**-Ricky Knight Jr.; **5**-Connor Mills

WXW: CHAMPION–VACANT; **1**-1 Called Manders; **2**-Mike D Vecchio; **3**-Joseph Fenech Jr.; **4**-Ahura; **5**-Laurance Roman

DEFY WRESTLING: CHAMPION–VACANT; **1**-KENTA; **2**-Nick Wayne; **3**-Guillermo Rosas; **4**-SCHAFF; **5**-Joey Janela

GAME CHANGER WRESTLING: CHAMPION–EFFY; **1**-Matt Tremont; **2**-Masha Slamovich; **3**-John Wayne Murdoch; **4**-Dr. Redacted; **5**-Tony Deppen

HOODSLAM: CHAMPION–Cereal Man; **1**-MYLO; **2**-James C; **3**-KEITA; **4**-Richard Shhhnary; **5**-DARK Sheik

JUGGALO CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING (HEAVYWEIGHT): CHAMPION–Willie Mack; **1**-Caleb Konley; **2**-Tuff Tony; **3**-Colby Corino; **4**-FACADE; **5**-Luigi Primo

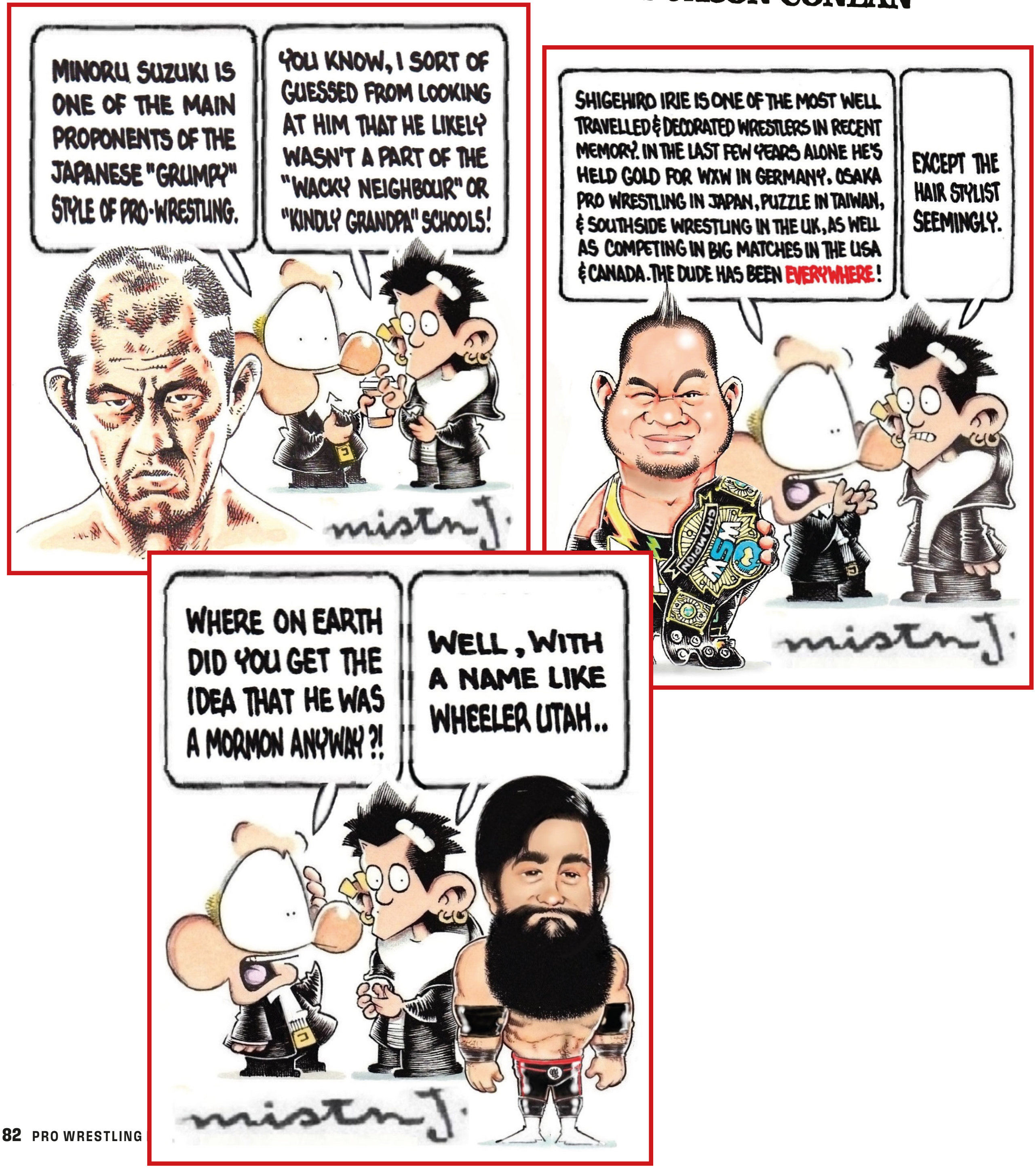
JUGGALO CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING (WOMEN): CHAMPION–Dani Mo; **1**-Mickie Knuckles; **2**-Sonny Kiss; **3**-Alice Crowley; **4**-Rae Larson; **5**-Randi West

Want to be an honorary member of the *PWI* Ratings committee? Simply make a top 10 of your choosing, then email it to pwi@kappapublishing.com

Each issue, we'll include a reader submission or two. Have fun! And don't forget to include your name and hometown, so that we can credit you.

DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN


MINORU SUZUKI IS ONE OF THE MAIN PROPONENTS OF THE JAPANESE "GRUMPY" STYLE OF PRO-WRESTLING.
YOU KNOW, I SORT OF GUESSED FROM LOOKING AT HIM THAT HE LIKELY WASN'T A PART OF THE "WACKY NEIGHBOUR" OR "KINDLY GRANDPA" SCHOOLS!
mistr J.
SHIGEHIRO IRIE IS ONE OF THE MOST WELL TRAVELLED & DECORATED WRESTLERS IN RECENT MEMORY. IN THE LAST FEW YEARS ALONE HE'S HELD GOLD FOR WXW IN GERMANY, OSAKA PRO WRESTLING IN JAPAN, PUZZLE IN TAIWAN, & SOUTHSIDE WRESTLING IN THE UK, AS WELL AS COMPETING IN BIG MATCHES IN THE USA & CANADA. THE DUDE HAS BEEN EVERYWHERE!
EXCEPT THE HAIR STYLIST SEEMINGLY.
CHAMPION
WSM
mistr J.
WHERE ON EARTH DID YOU GET THE IDEA THAT HE WAS A MORMON ANYWAY?!
WELL, WITH A NAME LIKE WHEELER UTAH..
mistr J.

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